

Intermezzo I

LOST

August 10, 1996

Lucia Covelli sat at a small glass-topped table in a wide loggia that overlooked the azure sea. Morning was the best time of the day – in a complicated world, this was one of the few things of which she was certain. She was dressed casually, far more casually than would normally be the case. The Granger girl had reacted very poorly to anything that even hinted at cloaks or robes, and her client's comfort was very important at the moment. Blue denims and loose white shirts were hardly an imposition, in any case; she had dressed similarly in her graduate school days, thirty years prior.

Her morning's reading was strewn across the table, held fast against the breeze by small stones gathered from the beaches far below. Each day she had *La Repubblica* for breakfast, as well as the *Times* – both London and New York – and *Yomiuri Shimbun*. The last was a legacy of her ex-husband's business interests, but she'd made it her own long before the divorce. After that, it was always case notes and her morning espresso.

It was rare when all her notes could be held in a single binder. However, she found herself with the very unaccustomed luxury of a single client. Still, that one client was shaping up as a serious challenge. The cases that came to her via *Amelia Bones* were often coloured with cloak-and-dagger overtones, but this one....

The girl was only sixteen, though she both appeared and projected herself as somewhat older. She displayed a very facile mind, beneath which Covelli suspected were several layers of trauma. She projected a strong personality, as well. It was absurd to think that all of this was the result of a single explosive incident of accidental magic. The girl's guard – and the fact that she required a guard raised its own questions – was a terribly injured but absurdly polite fellow named Moody, who insisted upon being called Alastor. He had quickly forwarded her concerns to *Bones*. The response was cryptic, and

asked her to expect a representative with more information – a functionary from the British Ministry bearing a dossier, she presumed.

The tapping of shoes rang out on the terrazzo. "Who is there, please?" she asked loudly, as she slammed shut the binder containing her notes. She was fairly sure it wasn't Moody; the sound of his wooden leg made for an uneven pattern.

The voice that answered was terribly familiar. "Good morning, Lucia. You were never an early riser when we were young."

Covelli gasped. She fumbled for her reading spectacles unsuccessfully, and settled for squinting at the speaker; she saw sharp features, a severe bun, and an equally severe cloak. The woman was surely not a messenger, and was in fact nearly the last person she had expected to see. Has it been four years? Five? she wondered. After settling herself, she responded, "People change, Minerva... or do they? How long has it been since you last let your hair down? Forty years?"

Minerva McGonagall crossed her arms. "I see that you remain too vain to wear spectacles. Perhaps we don't change at all."

Covelli rose slowly but gracefully, as schoolgirl banter from days long past played through her mind. "That cloak belongs on a crone," she said haughtily.

McGonagall's lips nearly disappeared. "Those denims belong on a child."

"Biddy," Covelli snapped.

"Priss," McGonagall snorted.

"Bint," Covelli laughed, and added, "Now that is a word I have not used in quite some time."

McGonagall smiled faintly. She briskly strode forward and clasped Covelli's hands. "It's been too long, Luci."

"It has," Covelli agreed.

"An owl now and again would be appreciated," McGonagall chided.

Covelli frowned. "It's been nearly fifty years since I kept an owl, as you are well aware. You could make use of a telephone."

McGonagall's smile broadened for a moment. "I used a telephone last year, on one occasion."

Covelli gestured toward the second chair at the glass-topped table. "Life takes many unexpected turns, does it not?"

McGonagall sat heavily. "Indeed."

Covelli pushed her papers and binder aside before sitting. "When we were young, I could see that you would be headmistress of Hogwarts." She stopped for a moment, and pushed back any harshness in her tone. "I understand that it is purely a matter of time now."

"I have no desire for change, and no need for power," McGonagall said firmly. "Albus will serve many more years. As for myself, I doubt that I shall remain at Hogwarts beyond the end of the decade."

Covelli knew that her face soured at the mention of Dumbledore, and she consciously refocused; it was only then that McGonagall's announcement dawned on her. "You? Leave Hogwarts? What would you do with yourself?"

McGonagall shot her a cross look. "Retire, of course! I am old, in case that had somehow escaped your attention."

"We're only seventy years old," Covelli chided. "That is the prime of life."

"Luci, we're seventy-one years old, and for me the emphasis lies squarely upon old – my prime has passed," McGonagall sighed. "Even the men in your family appeared unaccountably young for their

ages, as I remember it. On the other hand, I am able to pass for my actual age amongst Muggles with precious little effort."

Why do you choose to see yourself as old? Covelli wondered. She frowned, and changed the subject. "I have heard more talk of Muggles and blood in the last two days than in the preceding twenty years. I take it that much of wizarding Britain still uses the word 'Muggle' as an epithet?"

McGonagall matched her frown. "It only grows worse."

Covelli watched McGonagall carefully – it was a professional hazard, one that she was willing to indulge. "When will you ask about her? She is one of yours, after all, and I assume she is the sort of student in whom you would take an interest."

McGonagall nodded, and the corners of her mouth turned upward. "Perceptive as ever... ten points to Gryffindor, Miss Greengrass."

Covelli stiffened, despite herself. "I was twenty-one years old when I last went by that name," she managed to say.

McGonagall closed her eyes, and lowered her chin. "My apologies. I didn't intend to bring forth unwelcome memories."

Covelli gritted her teeth. "It will be difficult for you to avoid sensitivities, should you choose to speak of those days."

"Very well," McGonagall said in clipped tones. "Yes, Miss Granger is one of my charges..."

"And you wish to know of her progress, if any, in as much detail as I can provide," Covelli finished for her.

McGonagall relaxed, and the trace of a smile returned to her lips. "Do you know me so well, or am I simply transparent?"

"You're far from transparent, Minnie," Covelli said. "Hermione Granger is a very intriguing young woman."

"She is that," McGonagall agreed. "Have you made any progress, then?"

"First, there's little to tell. That is why you're here. Second, it's best that you pose that question to her parents," Covelli said firmly. "I can not – and will not – answer you directly without their permission."

"I see," McGonagall said hesitantly. "Of course... you're perfectly correct, of course. I shouldn't presume any rights in this instance."

Covelli sat back in her chair, and continued, "She is obviously important to you. Do you consider her your protégé?"

McGonagall sat up sharply in her chair. "There are so many of them, year after year after year... most remain at arm's length," she explained hesitantly. "They grow up before your eyes... some acquit themselves well, and some do not. After they leave, some acknowledge you with a wave in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade, and some do not. Once in a great while – not often, thank Merlin – but once in a great while, one truly stands out. Harry Potter is special, of course, very special – that goes almost without saying... but Hermione..." She trailed off into a deep sigh.

Covelli let McGonagall stare into the distance. And thus all roads continue to lead to Harry Potter, she thought. What's happening here? After a time, she caught McGonagall's eye and asked, "How much do you know about the girl's upbringing?"

McGonagall's lips thinned, and she looked down before making eye contact. She said, "That is not something we've discussed in great detail."

You haven't changed in sixty years, Covelli laughed to herself. I'll let you lie to me, for now. Instead, she asked, "You weren't a religious sort, were you?"

McGonagall arched an eyebrow. "I was raised in the Church of England, on account of my mother. Albus has prevailed upon me to attend services, from time to time, but... I would not consider myself

religious in the sense that I believe you intend." Her brow arched higher still. "What are you searching for?"

Covelli thought about what she could say and what she could not. "I'm trying to understand the particular significance of the book she was clutching when she arrived," she ventured. "She wouldn't release it until this morning, and still won't let it out of her sight."

"She's quite fond of books. The book is religious in nature?" McGonagall asked.

"I've seen many of its kind placed in lodgings during my travels," Covelli returned. "It is the New Testament of the Bible. Do you have any thoughts as to why she might be so attached to it?"

McGonagall leaned back in her chair. "I... I can't imagine, honestly." She folded her hands before her face, and seemed to retreat.

"She's holding back," Covelli said. "This is why I contacted Bones."

"Holding back in what way?" McGonagall asked.

"She has tried to convince me that all of this stems from the incident in the flat," Covelli explained. "Her parents are clearly devastated and appear to have experienced trauma of their own. They all seem to be awaiting permission to speak, in a sense. This makes effective treatment impossible."

"Hermione Granger has seen and done things that few of us will ever face," McGonagall said; her voice was painfully measured. "Doubtless she feels that she is in possession of important information, perhaps even secret information."

"Do you care for this girl?" Covelli snapped.

McGonagall's eyes flashed. "She is the best student Hogwarts has produced in at least twenty –"

Covelli cut her off. "Please don't avoid my question."

McGonagall deflated. "Yes," she said quietly. "Hermione is very important to me."

Covelli sighed in frustration. "Then act in that spirit. You sounded like Dumbledore just now. Either tell me what she is hiding, or lead me to understand how I can build trust with her."

McGonagall seemed to wage an inner war. When the battle was concluded, she asked, "Will you allow me to speak with her?"

Covelli nodded. "I shall be meeting with her parents in a few minutes. You can spend that time with her. She is quite fragile now; I trust that you will be measured and calming?"

McGonagall nodded. "I am capable of measured communication."

"I remember your idea of diplomacy, Minnie," Covelli teased.

"People do, in fact, change," McGonagall snapped.

Covelli waited for a long time, before she asked gently, "Do you need to talk?"

McGonagall frowned. "Is that a professional question?"

Covelli sighed. "Minnie... after all these years..." She moved to her feet.

McGonagall stood as well, stiff as a broomstick. "Luci... it has been too long." She sagged, and Covelli enveloped her in a sisterly embrace. McGonagall responded awkwardly, in the way of a person unaccustomed to touch.

"Stay," Covelli said.

McGonagall pulled back, and looked at her curiously. "Pardon?"

"Stay here, at the villa," Covelli offered.

"I don't wish to intrude," McGonagall said. "Hermione's care is the most important consideration –"

"You won't intrude," Covelli insisted. "Tell me – do you believe I might need assistance in interpreting her experiences?"

McGonagall stroked her chin. "I hadn't thought of that. I'd simply intended to answer your questions as best I could... there is Hogwarts business to which I can attend..."

"Let us get you settled, then," Covelli said. "I have a number of guest rooms available, and we must get you some proper attire as well." She grinned impishly. "You'll roast like a hag in Salem wearing that thing here."

McGonagall shook her head. "The phrases one picks up in the States – goodness. At any rate, there's no need to fuss."

Covelli turned on a full-bore smile, knowing what the effect would be. "I live to fuss," she said.

McGonagall rolled her eyes like a schoolgirl, and Covelli resisted the urge to crow. I'll liven you up, dear Minnie, she thought.

Covelli put her fingers to her mouth and gave a piercing and thoroughly unladylike whistle – something that she had learned in her university days principally to torture her mother. An ancient woman in a drab dress trundled out to the loggia.

"Gina, può aiutarmi con il bagaglio per favore?" Covelli asked.

The woman waved her arm derisively. She squinted at McGonagall, and snapped in a thin and reedy voice, "Fa come fossi a casa tua!"

Covelli crossed her arms, and tapped her foot. "Gina can be so difficult!" she pouted. "All I asked was that she help with the baggage, and she –"

McGonagall cut her off. "I heard her quite clearly. Grazie tanto, Gina. Vorrei di carta da lettere?"

Gina summoned a crooked and ancient smile. "You speak, then," she said.

"No. Per imparare bene la lingua, ci vuole molto pratica," McGonagall said smoothly.

"Only you would be able to express why you do not speak a language, using the very language that you supposedly do not speak," Covelli smirked.

Gina looked McGonagall up and down, then grunted, "For you and the girl, I speak the English. For the one with the leg, no." The ancient maid cast Covelli a withering glance, and added, "I get Antony for the bags. He sits and he eats... good for nothing. Bah!" She turned her head and spat for effect, and then added, "I bring your – eh – parchment," before she stomped off.

Covelli shrugged. "Gina was my mother's domestica – can you imagine? I'm increasingly convinced that she must have been Augustus Caesar's domestica, as well. What can one do?"

"I'm sure that you have more important things to do than guide me around," McGonagall said. "As I said, I have Hogwarts business to occupy my time; we're putting into place some changes in September..." She tugged at her cloak. "It is far too warm for a cloak, isn't it?"

"This is the Amalfi coast, Minnie, not Hogsmeade," Covelli said. "You will find everything more relaxed here."

"I have one bag – it wasn't as though I planned to remain here," McGonagall said, and took out her wand. "I can manage it on my own, thank you."

Covelli set her hand over the wand. "No."

McGonagall was taken aback. "No?"

"Magical energy must be kept to a minimum throughout the villa," Covelli said. "That is why the Apparation point is outside the walls, why I do not take fire calls, and why I retain a Squib domestica and groundskeeper."

"Why? I don't—" McGonagall began.

"The overwhelming majority of my clients are neither witch nor wizard," Covelli explained. "I have found over the years that paranoids and schizophrenics often sense magic, even though they cannot see it or understand it. After this case, I will surely have need to contract with an Unspeakable or the like. It will take a full energy negation before I may resume my regular practice here." She sighed. "It wouldn't be the first time."

"No magic, then. Well... well... that should be... quaint." McGonagall reluctantly put away her wand. "I do look forward to hearing more about your work – in general terms, of course."

"I'll want to hear about your work, as well," Covelli ventured. "Events in your world have certainly been interesting, since we last spoke."

"Indeed," McGonagall agreed. "We can scarcely turn without tripping over your former spouse these days."

Covelli consciously kept her shoulders from rising and her lips from sneering. When the moment passed, she said flatly, "We both gained as a result of the marriage. I have few regrets."

McGonagall seemed to weigh her words. "And how does your daughter fare in all of this?"

Covelli sighed. "Some things are best set aside, to await a bottle of chianti and a fine meal."

"I look forward to that," McGonagall said.

"As do I," Covelli agreed. "I will tell you something of my daughter, and perhaps you will explain why a senior British ministry official arranged psychological treatment for a sixteen year old girl."

McGonagall sighed. "Perhaps we should dispense with that presently."

* * * * *

McGonagall stopped short of the closed bedroom door, and composed herself. As soon as she felt prepared, she knocked sharply three times. There was no response.

"Miss Granger?" she called out evenly. "This is Professor McGonagall. May I come in?" She heard sounds from inside the room, but no answer to her question. "Hermione? Would you please allow me inside?"

The door muffled the sounds inside, but she could hear humming of some kind, perhaps singing. She sniffed – there was a peculiar acrid odour in the corridor. Suddenly there came a loud whump from inside the room, followed quickly by a crackling sound. McGonagall turned the doorknob as hard as she could, but it spun uselessly.

"Hermione? Let me inside now, please!" she called out.

"I can't," Hermione returned.

"Open the door," McGonagall demanded.

"I can't," Hermione repeated.

McGonagall sniffed again. Something's burning, she realised. 'No magic' indeed! "Stand aside!" she roared, and drew her wand. The door exploded inward, and she raced inside.

Flames licked up from inside a small rubbish bin beside the bed. A section of the wooden floor was burning and the bedcovers looked to be next. McGonagall called out a fire-suppression charm and then cast a very weak Vortex Charm to draw the lingering smoke into the corridor and away from Hermione. For her part, the girl sat before a writing table next to the shuttered window as if nothing had happened.

She didn't even turn to acknowledge that the door had opened or that the flames had been quelled.

McGonagall dashed across the room to her. "Come, we must leave this room immediately!"

"I can't; I have to finish this," Hermione said without looking away from the mass of papers strewn across the table. Several sheets before her were covered with text. She scribbled madly with a Muggle biro until she reached the bottom of the page at hand. When she finally turned to face McGonagall, she was insistent. "I need to finish this now."

McGonagall took a half step backward. Hermione's eyes were devoid of anything at all – no description seemed to capture their appearance, in McGonagall's mind. The girl's face was pale and drawn, even more sunken than during the journey to Italy. "What is it that you need to finish?" she managed to ask.

"The jailer left an assignment for me," Hermione said off-handedly. "The first draft wasn't right, so I had to be rid of it." She gestured absently toward the charred rubbish bin.

"The jailer? What...?" McGonagall stopped cold. "Where is your wand? Does Mr. Moody still have it?" she enquired, even as her eyes searched the room.

"Haven't seen it since... you know..." Hermione whispered, and then ducked back toward the papers and to her work, whatever it was.

Severus had insisted upon administering a potion to temporarily suppress her magic, as soon as she and her parents had been brought to Grimmauld Place from the Lovegoods'. Obviously, it had since worn off. McGonagall carefully leaned forward – she didn't want to panic the poor girl - and peered through her spectacles over Hermione's shoulder.

Two equally distributed handwritten columns covered each of the dozen or more pages. All of it consisted of a single phrase, repeated.

I will not tell lies.

Hermione looked up again, with a faint smile that McGonagall would have taken for pride in other circumstances. “It’s almost right. If I just keep writing it, it’ll stay.”

Baffled, McGonagall knelt beside the girl. “You’ve written these words a thousand times,” she said gently. “I daresay that they’ll remain on the pages.”

Hermione stared down without comprehension, and shook her head slowly. “Here,” she said, pointing to the back of her hand. “It’ll stay here, like it stayed on Harry. She thinks we’ll lie but we won’t do it; we won’t. She won’t beat us. We won’t tell her anything.”

McGonagall’s mind raced. She wondered who ‘she’ was. She wondered what had really happened to Hermione when Voldemort attacked her family home. The girl before her bore little resemblance to the student McGonagall had known, in the ways that mattered – she seemed confused, lost and strangely childlike.

“He doesn’t want to tell,” Hermione confided. “I wanted him to tell, but he wouldn’t. He won’t let her beat us. He won’t let them win.”

“Harry wrote these lines for someone,” McGonagall asked. “Who accused him of lying? When did this happen?”

Hermione focused intently upon something beyond McGonagall’s ear. “I took murtlap essence from the stores,” she said distantly. “It bled for days, you know.”

“It bled... what?” McGonagall seized Hermione’s hand, and traced her finger across the back of it. “Here? Did these words appear here, on Harry’s hand? Did... did Umbridge do this to him?”

“It’s still there,” Hermione whispered. “All you have to do is look for it.”

“Did she do this to you, as well? Hermione... please...” McGonagall demanded to know.

Hermione pulled her hand free. She snarled, “Where were you?”

McGonagall was stunned by the question, and she tried to measure her response. “Hermione... last year was hard on so many —”

Hermione abruptly jumped to her feet, and McGonagall nearly toppled over backward. “Where were you? He bled for days! Snape tortured at him... and I didn’t... Dumbledore said it was for his own good, and I believed it... I told Harry to keep going....”

McGonagall slowly clambered up from the floor. “Professor Dumbledore had very legitimate —”

Hermione’s fists clenched and shook violently. “Where were you? Where were any of you? Taking your tea in the bloody staff room?” she roared.

McGonagall held herself in check with considerable effort. “Umbridge would have removed us all, and the Ministry would have welcomed it. We had to weigh everyone’s needs, under the circumstances —”

Hermione’s face contorted, and her eyes judged and convicted McGonagall. “Where were you? COWARDS!” The girl slammed her fist down against the writing table; it rattled and shook wildly.

“You need to sit down now,” McGonagall said as calmly as she could manage. “It’s best to sit and relax, and we can discuss this in a calm and reasoned fashion.”

Hermione continued to stand, her fists growing tighter, her posture growing more menacing. “You could have stopped it, you could have helped him,” she snarled. “Snape could have stopped it. Dumbledore could have stopped it with a word.”

McGonagall felt herself begin to slump, as guilt crept upon her. “Perhaps I should have paid more mind, but Harry has always... you’ve been resourceful, the two of you and Weasley. That’s why I encouraged Harry toward his ambition, toward becoming an Auror, toward —”

“He doesn’t want that!” Hermione shouted. “We hate the Ministry!”

McGonagall took in a sharp breath. She had already begun working on Severus to admit Harry into N.E.W.T.-level Potions, before the dismissal. To hear that it would have been for nought was like a punch to the mid-section. “I can’t believe it has come to this. Harry wanted so much to be... it was surely in the heat of the moment... he couldn’t really have meant it... could he have?”

“He meant every word! I – will – not – tell – lies!” Hermione exploded. The sound of strained metal rent the air and the frame of the bed collapsed. The writing table exploded into splinters, and the papers on the floor burst into confetti that whirled about the room.

McGonagall ducked the shower of splinters. She’d seen the Lovegoods’ flat, after Hermione’s collapse, and knew that there was little time to waste. She levelled her wand and whispered, “Stupefy.” Hermione fell onto her, and they both crashed to the floor at the end of the fallen bed.

As loudly as she could manage, McGonagall shouted, “Luci!” She kept shouting until Covelli and Hermione’s parents found them there. McGonagall was too overwhelmed to be embarrassed by her own tears.

It looked like Hogwarts, but it wasn’t – it couldn’t be. Hermione picked her way through shattered corridors to the tatters of the Fat Lady’s portrait.

“Password, please. Say it as though you mean it,” the Fat Lady’s mouth said from a dangling strip of canvas.

“Failure,” Hermione said, and the shredded portrait’s frame fell to the floor.

The Common Room looked as though M.C. Escher had drawn it. The stairs were twisted like Moebius strips, the fireplace jutted downward

from the ceiling, and the floor was curved. She lost her footing, and slid to the centre of the room before coming to a stop.

All the couches were set on their backs, facing upward toward the fire. Hermione scrambled back to the edge of the room, and wrapped her hand around the doorjamb. People sat on the couches – actually, they were bloody molten things shaped like people. One was taller than the others, with a shock of singed red hair. It turned toward her.

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends,” it said, just before it dissolved into a thick red puddle.

“Ron?” Hermione cried. “No! No!”

Ginny came in through the opening to the corridor, but paid her no mind. She walked to the red puddle, nudged it with her toes, sat down on the couch, and calmly began to pick off her face. “Greater love hath no woman than this, that she lay down her life for her friends,” she said. “Would you like to lay down, Hermione?”

Hermione fell to her knees, sobbing. “I can’t! I tried to do it! You know that, Ginny, don’t you? I tried so hard!”

You must take control of this, while you can.

The voice was everywhere and nowhere. Hermione wiped at her eyes with the backs of her hands and sought out the source, but saw no one except her tattered and melting friends. A cloud of incense billowed into the room, and she gagged at the smell and the taste. Madame Trelawney swept down the stairs from the girls’ dormitories, with bulging eyes, billowing robes, and absurd gestures.

She stopped in front of Hermione, and dramatically called to the heavens. Her eyes glazed over, and she said in a misty monotone, “You have no love in you. Your heart is a dead, shrivelled thing. You can only take... and take... and take...” She began to claw her own eyes out, and Hermione shoved her up the sloping floor until she fell backward into the corridor. The Common Room sagged deeper; Hermione lost her balance, and she rolled head-over-heels back to its center

“Enjoying the show?” a silky voice whispered in her ear. Her blood ran cold as she turned to face Tom Riddle. He was young and healthy, with dark hair and intense eyes, and something achingly familiar about him. He pushed Ginny aside, flopped down on the couch, and eagerly ate popcorn from a bowl. Hermione tried to turn and run from him, but her feet sank into the stone.

Listen to me, Hermione. This is your dream. It’s yours to control.

Once again, she looked for the voice but saw only Riddle. “You can’t save him, Hermione. You can’t even save yourself. You may as well enjoy the show,” he smirked.

Her fingers turned to claws, and she dug her feet free. She slowly dragged herself up the curving floor to the portrait hole. The corridor outside was all wrong now, with ever-changing twists and turns like a writhing snake. A new portrait had replaced the Fat Lady.

“You know who you are,” the portrait said. It was a woman, her thick dark hair tinged with white strands, and blue eyes ablaze; “This is a terrible place. Surely you don’t want to stay?”

Hermione gazed at the woman. She saw her breath, and her feet froze to the floor. “I know you,” she said.

“Yes, and I’d like to know you,” the portrait returned. “Come back with me.”

“You’re the voice I was hearing...aren’t you?” Hermione asked weakly.

“Keep thinking – never stop thinking, and never give into this. You’ll make the connections,” the portrait encouraged her.

The corridor rippled, and Hermione barely maintained her footing. “How can I come with you?” she shivered.

“Any way that you like,” the portrait told her. “It’s your dream, after all.”

A deep dangerous rumbling echoed from one end of the corridor, closing fast. “But it’s real. It’s all true –” Hermione began.

The portrait chuckled softly. “This is vivid but hardly real, and all its truths are subjective. In your everyday experience, do people melt? Are there fireplaces on the ceiling?”

Hermione hesitated, and grew even colder. “Is it better out there?”

“Could it possibly be worse than here?” the portrait asked. “Take my hand, and hold tightly.” A canvas hand extended from the front of the portrait, and reached out until Hermione seized it. When she could see clearly again, she sat next to the woman from the portrait, on the squashy couch before the fire in the Common Room that she knew.

“I remember you... I’m at a villa that overlooks the sea,” Hermione said hesitantly.

“That’s right,” the woman said. “I’m Doctor Covelli – do you recall our meetings?”

Hermione did recall it now and she didn’t understand why that seemed like a revelation. “It hasn’t gone all that well, has it?” she said quietly.

“It could be better,” Covelli said. “Are you frightened?”

“A little, yes,” Hermione admitted.

“What frightens you?” Covelli asked.

“I should have been frightened in there. I was, but I wasn’t, not really,” Hermione said. “It was all very strange.”

Covelli flashed an enigmatic smile. “Interesting. Are there other fears?”

“A few,” returned Hermione. “This isn’t the real Common Room. Where am I?”

“Excellent,” Covelli said. “You know where you are. Keep thinking on it.”

Hermione sat bolt upright. She was coming out of a dark fog. “I was writing lines, and then... Professor McGonagall was there, and she stunned me, I think. Yes – I had another outburst, and she stunned me.”

“Where are you?” Covelli asked.

Hermione stood up from the squashy couch, with great effort. “I should be waking soon. Hopefully, I won’t need you or any other figments of my imagination.”

Covelli seemed to regard her carefully. “You’re getting closer. What gave the room away, may I ask?”

“Nothing here casts a shadow,” Hermione observed. “The room is perfectly lit, which is impossible.”

Covelli crossed her arms. “Nothing casts a shadow?”

Hermione looked down. “Interesting – it seems that I cast one.” She froze. “So do you.” Her mind took a leap forward. “I’m not imagining you. I’m not going to wake up now, am I?”

“Not immediately, no,” Covelli said impassively.

Hermione wandered the room, picking up various objects and putting them down again. “Are you using a Dreamweaver?” she asked.

“I do understand why your professor is so fond of you,” Covelli laughed.

Hermione turned on her. “I want to wake up. Why are you keeping me here?” she demanded.

“Think on the dream that you just had, and you’ll answer your own question,” Covelli calmly instructed.

“I wasn’t myself anymore... if I were to awaken right now, I wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between reality and dreams,” Hermione realised. “I’d be irretrievably mad, wouldn’t I?”

“The human mind is rarely so absolute in my experience,” Covelli said. “I believe you would have eventually recovered, but at great cost. By remaining here for now, you have the opportunity to shape the outcome. I had to make a professional judgment and I did so.” Hermione said nothing, and Covelli added, “Do you regret my decision?”

“No,” Hermione said quickly. “Thank you for that. It’s just... I think I should be grateful, actually, but I can’t seem to manage it. I’m finding it difficult to feel anything at all.” She looked to Covelli nervously. “Am I making any sense?”

Covelli stood, and walked to the foot of the stairs that led to the girls’ dormitories. “You have an excellent eye for detail,” she said. “This room hasn’t changed much since I last saw it, actually. What’s missing, do you think?”

“It’s missing the smaller things – books, for example, or bric-a-brac,” Hermione noticed. In a blink, the various sets of shelves filled with books and the tables were littered with personal items.

“Yes, quite an eye,” Covelli noted with approval. “What else is missing?”

Hermione smiled, for the first time in a long while. “Crookshanks,” she said. Her stout orange cat sauntered down the stairs and into the room, brushing slowly against her leg before settling in front of the fire.

Covelli reached down and scratched the cat behind the ears. “Fascinating. Is there more?”

Of course, Hermione thought. She concentrated on her roommates; on Ginny and Ron; and finally, reluctantly, on Harry. None of them appeared. “I don’t understand,” she said.

“This is a very quiet room, isn’t it?” Covelli observed. “It’s a very safe room.”

“I’m hiding in here, aren’t I?” Hermione realised.

“Only safe things will appear here – you’ve no room remaining for anxieties or doubts,” Covelli said. “It’s common for people to have a safe place in their landscape of dreams, even if it lies beyond conscious awareness. You’re here now because this is where you need to be.”

Hermione flopped backward onto the squashy couch. “I like it here, I think.”

“Do you understand the consequences of remaining here for too long?” Covelli asked.

Hermione stood again – it seemed easier this time – and browsed the shelves until she found what she sought. She opened the book, turned to a particular page, and read aloud. “For, what other dungeon is so dark as one’s own heart! What jailer so inexorable as one’s self!”

Covelli moved to glance at the book binding. “You’re rather well read, aren’t you? Hawthorne...at least one of his other works should be required reading for English witches, I believe.”

“How will I leave?” Hermione asked.

“How much do you know about Dreamweavers?” Covelli returned.

“I know what they are, and a bit about how they work,” Hermione said. “Given their, um, status, it’s not surprising that the library lacks key information. I don’t understand how you were able to make one so quickly. Aren’t they made specifically for the user?”

“Usually, yes,” Covelli confirmed. “What possessed you to learn about Dreamweavers in the first place?”

"I had a strong interest in nightmares last year," Hermione said cautiously.

Covelli studied her for a few moments. "I see. In any case, you are using my personal Dreamweaver."

Hermione felt a flutter of panic, but it quickly dissipated into the room. "But doesn't that mean...?" She felt as though she needed to catch her breath, though the feeling wasn't disturbing. "If I can't get out, neither can you."

"Again, the human mind is rarely absolute," Covelli assured her. "I can leave here as long as I return within a reasonable period of time. If you were to become locked in this room, I could sever myself from the Dreamweaver. It would... not be pleasant."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Why...?"

"Consider it a display of trust," Covelli proposed. "It might help us both if you'd consider extending the same."

Hermione hesitated. "There are things I know... I'm not sure..."

"Your professor has gathered that. She summoned your Headmaster. He will give you permission to speak, if that is what you must have," Covelli said. "If you concentrate, you will be able to hear what's taking place outside." She inclined her head toward the unlit fireplace; a large jar of Floo powder sat atop the mantle. "Consider using the fireplace as a metaphor."

Hermione swore that Covelli's jaw ground at the word 'Headmaster'. Something else occurred to her, and she felt a momentary blush. "What about...other sorts of things?" she asked.

"What sort of things?" Covelli enquired.

"Personal things," Hermione managed.

"These are your thoughts and dreams," Covelli reminded her. "I will know and see what you want me to know and see. Those choices are

yours to make. Of course, the more that I know and see, the more likely it is that I can provide assistance.”

“I still don’t understand how I’ll know when it’s time to leave,” Hermione said.

“The Dreamweaver will know. You’ll fall into a normal sleep, and awaken a few hours later,” Covelli answered.

Hermione closed her eyes, and tried to still her thoughts as though she were about to take a brutally difficult examination. “I’m tired,” she said at length. “Is it dangerous for me to rest?”

“No,” Covelli said. “I’ll be watching over you. You need to know that I may not always appear as myself. Dreamguides –”

“Take many forms,” Hermione finished for her. “Von Hennen mentioned that in her introductory chapter.”

“Very good,” Covelli said. “You’re safe here, for now. I’ll return when you’re rested.”

Hermione rested her head against one arm of the couch. Crookshanks toddled over to her, climbed up, and curled into a ball atop her legs. She didn’t even notice when Covelli left the room.

Covelli hadn’t uttered a sound in nearly half-an-hour – not since she had mumbled ‘hoggy-woggy-Hogwarts’ and then laughed. She had barely moved at all since closing her eyes an hour prior. McGonagall sat beside the bed in an ancient dining chair, and watched for the slightest squeak or movement. By contrast, Hermione had writhed as though she were in a horrific dream before falling deadly still.

“Unnnhhh,” Covelli groaned.

McGonagall sat up with a start. “Thank Merlin!” she gasped, and moved to help Covelli sit up.

“Nuh... NO!” Covelli snapped. “Leave me!” Her eyes were wild and lost.

“Luci! Do you know where you are?” McGonagall asked quickly.

Covelli’s eyes slowly came into focus. “Villa,” she managed. “Can’t be taken from her, remember?” She inclined her head toward Hermione. A thin gold chain bound Covelli’s right hand to Hermione’s left.

McGonagall dropped back into her chair heavily. “I can’t believe that I allowed you to do this,” she sighed.

“Not your decision,” Covelli croaked.

McGonagall brought a cup of water to Covelli’s lips, who eagerly drank from it. Covelli’s domestica – Gina, McGonagall recalled – opened the door, peered in, and let forth with a flurry of Italian. Covelli snapped something in return, closed her eyes, and frowned. “It seems that he has come, and brought someone with him. They have somehow Apparated directly into the villa. Minnie, have you altered my wards?”

“Wards? I thought there was no magic –” McGonagall started.

“There was to be no magic in the house. The property is warded, of course – I’m not a fool,” Covelli said. “Did you create a breach?”

“No!” McGonagall insisted. “Very little keeps Albus from his chosen destination, of course.”

“Of course,” Covelli spat. “First accidental magic, then the Dreamweaver, now Apparation... how will they possibly clean all of it away?” She opened her eyes again, and glared at McGonagall. “Well? Let’s get on with your intervention.”

“This is for Hermione, not for you!” McGonagall snapped. She sighed, and added, “Luci, it’s been fifty years. Why can’t you...?”

“Let it pass?” Covelli sneered. “Not in a thousand years, but it can’t be helped now – he’s here, and she may have need of him. Open the

door." When McGonagall stood to cross the room, Covelli sighed, "Use your wand, Minnie. I suspect I'll have to burn the villa to the ground and rebuild."

Madam Pomfrey rushed in first. "I gathered my things as quickly as I could. It wasn't clear whether supplies would be... Miss Granger?"

Dumbledore entered slowly, almost carefully. He seemed to take no notice of Madam Pomfrey's outburst, or Hermione's still form, or the condition of the room. His eyes were unreadable, and McGonagall shivered. "Hello, Lucia," he said.

Covelli's eyes narrowed. "You will address me as Doctor Covelli." McGonagall couldn't take her eyes off Covelli's free hand; it was clenched so tightly that her nails dug into her palm.

Madam Pomfrey gasped, "Is that what I think it is?" and reached toward Hermione.

"STOP!" Covelli shouted. "Do not touch her!"

Pomfrey shrunk back. "Albus... you do know that I'm required to report the existence of one of these...."

Covelli rolled her eyes. "Oh, for goodness' sake, Dreamweavers are not illegal!"

"In any case, we are not in England at present," Dumbledore said casually.

Covelli closed her eyes tightly. "There's no time for this. Minnie, introduce me to my accuser, so that we can move onward."

"Madam Pomfrey is our resident healer at Hogwarts," McGonagall said.

"Pomfrey...?" Covelli quickly opened one eye. "I remember you as a boy."

Madam Pomfrey appeared scandalized for a moment. “Certainly not! You... you must be thinking of my brother, Oscar. Did you attend Hogwarts?”

“Yes,” Covelli said flatly.

Dumbledore leaned in toward Hermione. She was draped in finely wrought netting – McGonagall knew that it was spun gold. The netting was interlaced every inch or two with a crystals. Seven of the stones were larger than the others – placed above the major chakras, McGonagall recalled. The largest stone rested on Hermione’s forehead.

“You used your own Dreamweaver for Miss Granger,” Dumbledore said.

Covelli said nothing for a time. “How did you recognise it as mine?” she asked at last.

“I did not,” Dumbledore admitted. “You would not have had the luxury of guiding her to make one of her own. In addition, this was intended to fit someone taller than Miss Granger, though it is properly positioned.”

“Five points to Slytherin,” Covelli sneered.

Dumbledore’s face froze, and McGonagall fought back the urge to wince. “I shall be sure to inform its Head of House of your generosity,” he said. “Why would you take such an audacious risk on Miss Granger’s behalf?”

“Because Bones said that you’re responsible for this,” Covelli seethed. “How many people have died over the years because of your mysterious plans, I wonder? We can head that list with my brother –”

Dumbledore sighed. “There is nothing that I can offer beyond an apology, Lucia, and I have done so many times –”

“You have no right to address me by my first name!” Covelli shouted. Dumbledore bowed his head.

“None of this is helping Hermione!” McGonagall snapped. Covelli took three long, slow breaths.

Dumbledore folded his hands thoughtfully. “She seemed to be in stable condition upon her departure,” he observed. “What has triggered this relapse?”

Covelli directed her answer to McGonagall; she refused to look in Dumbledore’s direction. “Relapse? Any previous events were merely precursors.”

“May I check on her physical condition?” Madam Pomfrey asked.

Covelli nodded. “Be sure that you do not dislodge the Dreamweaver in any way.” She sighed. “It’s probably best that you simply use your wand.”

Pomfrey appeared puzzled. “How else would I perform an examination?”

Covelli pounded her free hand against the bed. “Why did I do this? I should have known... Oh, God, I should have told Bones to just... argghhh!” She launched into a spewing rage in a crazy quilt of Italian and English that McGonagall strained to follow.

“Lu... Doctor Covelli! I know that I am unwelcome here, but there is no need to... I say!” Dumbledore started.

McGonagall’s jaw dropped; she could count on one hand the number of times that she had seen Dumbledore so rattled, and it dawned on her that Lucia Covelli had now instigated two of those occasions. Covelli continued to rage on. McGonagall picked out “cacasentenze” several times, which she thought she understood; “vecchio schifoso”, which she was more certain about; and “vaffanculo”, about which she had no doubt.

“Miss Granger’s pulse is lower than I’d like to see, and her magical energy is unusually depleted,” Pomfrey said quietly, “but she is intact

and doesn't seem to be in immediate danger. Under other circumstances, I'd administer a Dreamless Sleep potion."

Dumbledore immediately turned his attention to Pomfrey, and Covelli shifted the focus of her tirade. "Dreamless Sleep potion! If that remains the standard of care for trauma, it's no wonder that I receive so many referrals from England!"

Pomfrey's hands moved to her hips. "I don't know who you think you are, but I'll tell you that sometimes the only thing to be done is to put dreams at bay!"

Covelli gathered the chain that bound her to Hermione, and then squeezed the girl's hand as she shifted to a sitting position. She fixed Pomfrey with a haughty glare, and tilted her head regally. McGonagall cringed – she remembered that particular posture all too well.

"I am Lucia Elisabeth Greengrass Covelli, Madam. I completed my studies at Hogwarts, and then apprenticed under this old fraud," Covelli said brusquely, as she pointed rudely at Dumbledore. "After he sent my brother to his death and generally made a complete ruin of my life, I went on to earn my medical degree from the University of Torino and a doctorate in psychology from Columbia University. I have studied with some of the most capable therapists on the planet, and I have treated the minds and bodies of patients for more than forty years – and I'll tell you that putting dreams at bay only causes them to return later with greater intensity. If you want to learn something, then you may observe and perhaps assist. If you do not, then I suggest you leave us." She redirected her glare at Dumbledore. "I do hope you had the good sense to bring a Pensieve?"

Madam Pomfrey had slowly backed herself to the wall as Covelli had raged on. "I... believe that I went to school with your brother... er... one of your brothers – Carl?" she offered.

Covelli pursed her lips. "Giancarlo acknowledged me, did he? Perhaps you're just guessing; it's no matter. Yes, he is my youngest brother. May we now move along?"

Dumbledore withdrew a stone bowl from within his robes. “It did occur to me that a Pensieve might conserve valuable time. Do you have your wand at the ready?”

Covelli frowned. “No, I don’t.”

Dumbledore set the bowl at the foot of the bed and withdrew his wand. Covelli snapped, “Under no circumstances will you point that at me!”

“I can withdraw the memory, if you like,” McGonagall offered.

Covelli hesitated before nodding. “Take care with the extraction, Minnie; I’ll need it returned to its place.”

McGonagall looked up to see Pomfrey mouth “Minnie?” in astonishment. Her lips thinned, and she returned her focus to her wand and the proper incantation. Moments later, the resulting silvery thread was in its resting place, and their fingers were dipped into the pensieve.

They stood in a place that very closely resembled the Gryffindor Common Room, and watched Hermione talk to Covelli. Pomfrey gasped when Hermione said that she’d shut herself in the room; the implication was obvious. When Hermione mentioned having an interest in nightmares the previous year, McGonagall had searched for the slightest reaction on the Headmaster’s face and found a small hint of frustration. He stood there through the rest of it without expression. Hermione began to ask about other sorts of things, and the memory abruptly ended. McGonagall was left curious but set it aside.

Dumbledore stroked his beard. “I can certainly see how it is in Miss Granger’s best interests to communicate with you freely,” he said. “If she requires my permission, then she has it. We shall have to reach an understanding, you and I, when her treatment has concluded. If she is truly open to you, then I believe you will come to understand my position.”

Covelli let out a deeply held breath. "I thank you on her behalf," she said.

Dumbledore sighed. "You will most likely revoke that statement, after hearing the rest of what I must tell you. Miss Granger has had a recent experience relating to the keeping of secrets, which may affect the manner in which you choose to guide her."

"This is not something that I wish to hear," Covelli said menacingly.

"No, I fear that it is not," Dumbledore agreed. "I hesitate to discuss this openly." He made a point of looking down at Hermione.

"It is not as though I can follow you to the corridor," Covelli pointed out. "If it must be said, then say it."

Dumbledore proceeded to explain how he had acquired a secret-binding spell from Algernon Croaker at the Department of Mysteries, and had obtained Hermione's permission to cast it upon her in order to safeguard an important secret about Harry Potter. McGonagall realised immediately that it must have related to the lost prophecy in some way. Covelli began to ask specific questions about the nature of the spell.

As the details emerged, Covelli remained calm, but McGonagall began to boil inside. "How could you?" she interrupted.

"Miss Granger had no defenses with which to protect the information –" Dumbledore began.

"Then that information should have been kept from her," McGonagall snapped.

Dumbledore sighed. "I found that I could not refuse her. She wanted to assist Harry, by helping him to carry his burdens, and I could not stand in her way."

"I... I don't understand... Albus, how could you have... have done that to her... nothing could be so important that you would intentionally..." Madam Pomfrey stammered.

McGonagall had forgotten that Pomfrey was in the room. Dumbledore seemed to come to the same realization, and calmly turned. He said, "Obliviate. Poppy, you must inventory the potions stock in the Hospital Wing. You shall contact Severus to obtain any needed items. It is critically important that the Hospital Wing be well prepared for the times to come. You may leave my office now. I trust that you enjoyed your tea."

Madam Pomfrey blinked hard. "Yes... of course. The tea was lovely. I... must conduct a thorough inventory."

Dumbledore picked up a scrap of paper from the floor, pointed his wand at it, and said, "Portus. Poppy, be sure to throw this away, would you?"

"Certainly... Albus," Pomfrey said in a daze. "Mustn't... leave a mess." She took the paper and disappeared.

Covelli frowned deeply. "I see that you haven't changed. This had better be worth the lengths to which you have gone."

"Harry saw the prophecy, didn't he?" McGonagall asked.

"Yes," Dumbledore answered. "I shared it with him."

McGonagall's eyebrows rose. "But you told us that it was broken... the prophecy was revealed to you?"

"Indeed," Dumbledore said. "I only say what I am about to say because Miss Granger's life may hang in the balance, and because I bear responsibility for that circumstance."

"Goodness, it's getting easier for you to apologise... or perhaps she is needed for another of your grand plans?" Covelli sneered. McGonagall glared at her, and she looked away. Dumbledore said nothing; he merely motioned to the pensieve, and McGonagall carefully returned Covelli's memory.

Covelli worked her jaw as though attempting to cause her ears to pop. "Skillfully done," she said. "So, this poor girl has somehow become intertwined with a prophecy?"

Dumbledore nodded gravely. "Minerva, I shall leave it to you as to whether you wish to retain memory of what I am about to say. As I said before, Doctor Covelli, we shall need to reach an understanding at a later time." He spoke the prophecy, and then allowed the room to stand in silence.

McGonagall bit back tears. "It's not fair," she said. "It's simply not fair."

"Prophecies are, for the most part, neither fair nor equitable," Dumbledore gently pointed out.

Covelli winced and rubbed at her temple. "Is it a true prophecy? Are you certain of that?"

"Of that there is no doubt." Dumbledore removed his spectacles and deeply rubbed at his eyes.

"Do you truly expect the boy to be victorious, against this monster of yours?" Covelli asked.

"Harry must defeat Voldemort," Dumbledore insisted.

Covelli gritted her teeth. McGonagall began to move toward her, but Covelli waved her free hand dismissively. "You... expect a Pyrrhic victory, don't you? Your Mr. Potter... he will be a martyr?" she asked.

Dumbledore's blue eyes suddenly seemed bottomless, McGonagall thought. He fixed them on Covelli, and said, "I will gladly give my life to prevent that outcome."

Covelli groaned, "Heard that before..." She twitched, and this time McGonagall didn't hold back; she took up Covelli's free hand in her own.

"Could this kill her?" McGonagall asked Dumbledore anxiously.

Dumbledore looked to Covelli. "This was a noble choice, even if you do not believe that it was so," he said, but her eyes had already rolled back. She slumped against the pillows and lay completely still.

"Minerva, I shall leave it to you as to whether you wish to retain memory of what I am about to say..."

Their voices sounded distant, as though they were bubbling through deep water, but Hermione had heard enough. She couldn't bear to sit through the prophecy once more, so she withdrew from the fireplace. The flames reverted from a sickly green to a normal shade of orange. She didn't know what to make of Dr. Covelli's railing against Dumbledore, and she certainly didn't know what to make of her Headmaster now. He was not the man that she had once believed him to be; of that much she was certain. The Common Room had once seemed so comfortable to her but now it was confining her, chafing her.

The portrait hole suddenly opened but no one came through. There was a rasping sound, a sort of breathing sound. Her eyes swept the room; nothing was out of place. She took her wand in hand, caused it to shine brightly, and carefully crept into the corridor beyond.

There were no writhing walls this time, but the corridor seemed to curve more than it should have. She heard a scurrying sound behind her, and thought of rats. A few moments later, a rumbling began to fill the corridor... WHUMP-a-whump-a-WHUMP-a-WHUMP-a-whump-a-whump-a... louder and louder still, until the stone floor began to quiver.

She heard loud breaths before actually she saw it, and dove to one side just as an enormous something nearly ploughed into her. She saw massive heads and thick black fur and great trunk-like legs, and something else seated atop the rest of it.

"Wheeeeeee!" the smaller Something shouted out in what was surely unrestrained glee. Short blonde hair and wide eyes caught flashes of

light from the wall sconces as the beast and its rider disappeared into the darkness.

Hermione followed warily down the curving corridor, until she reached the central stairwell. It was completely empty; she could scarcely imagine Hogwarts so empty, even at Christmastime. Still, there was a faint sound... giggling? She began to descend the stairs, toward the Great Hall. It was definitely giggling, she decided – the peals of laughter that came from small children. The stairs seemed to go on forever. Somehow this Hogwarts was far larger than the one she knew.

The ceiling of the Great Hall depicted a clear day with high clouds, but Hermione thought it seemed as far away as real clouds would be. Everything was out of proportion – the tables were too high, the benches too long, the head table too far away. She didn't even recall the hall seeming so large on that first fearful evening when she had stood there, exposed, awaiting the Sorting Hat. It was at that moment that she looked down, and screamed.

She was wearing The Outfit. It was frilly and old-fashioned and oh-so-pink, and there she stood in the middle of the Great Hall, dressed in The Outfit and her childhood Mary Janes. 'My little Princess,' her daddy had called her, and it was her only happy memory of the horrid thing. Mummy had made her wear it to school once a week, which had been the highest form of punishment young Hermione had been able to imagine. It occurred to her that it should probably come up to her waist, shortly before it occurred to her that the Outfit was in fact a perfect fit.

"Maybe if I just hide in the park, no one will ever miss me," Hermione said in a little-girl voice. She crept along, ducking twice beneath the Ravenclaw tables, until she came to the old metal swing from the park, which was anchored in the stone floor just to one side of the head table. She looked around nervously, and clambered up. With her toes pointed as sharply as she could manage, she was barely able to push off, but she kept at it. Soon, she was swinging as high as she could go, and everything began to fall away – The Outfit and the beast in the corridor and Tom Riddle and Harry...

“Young lady, what do you think you’re doing? Classes begin in five minutes, and you’re going to soil your dress!” Cordelia Granger said. She was the perfect picture of a professional – immaculately styled hair, flawless teeth, tailored suit without a single ripple or wrinkle.

Hermione dragged her Mary Janes against the stone with each arc, until she came to a stop and slid down from the swing. Her mother took her by the hand. “Look at your shoes,” she scolded. “Those marks will never come off.”

“Yes, Mummy,” Hermione mumbled; “You’re right, of course.” She allowed herself to be led across the Great Hall to the Slytherin tables, where Mrs. Wickham awaited her.

“I’m terribly sorry, Mrs. Wickham,” her mother said smoothly. “Mr. Granger and I crossed signals this morning, I’m afraid.”

“Quite all right, Mrs. Granger, quite all right,” Mrs. Wickham assured her. “Hermione, please take your seat and open your mathematics text to page 136.”

They were all there, seated on the benches, glaring at her with murder in their eyes – Ralph Flatley, Lucinda Meecham, Teddy White, and David Stroud... her living nightmares from the Worthington Day School. Poor Victoria Fisher was there, as well.

“Lookie, lookie – Her-Majesty is here!” Ralph mocked.

“As long as we don’t have to listen to Her-Whinging,” drawled Lucinda.

David Stroud reached out and grabbed Hermione’s arm roughly. “Don’t you dare raise your hand,” he hissed.

“Let me go!” Hermione snapped, and pulled free.

“Mister Stroud! See me after class!” Mrs. Wickham boomed. Teddy watched Hermione until she returned his glance; he drew his finger across his throat and she hid behind her mathematics text.

“Who can tell me the square root of 361?” Mrs. Wickham asked. Hermione’s hand shot up, to her horror. She managed to wrestle it down; desperate, she sat on her hand, but then her other hand rose.

Her classmates all dropped their pencils and stared at her, judged her, hated her. “It’s... it’s not my fault. You could do it too, anyone can do it!” she blurted out.

Mrs. Wickham pointed to her. “Hermione?”

Ralph threw his book at her. “No, we can’t all do it!”

Hermione refused to cry. “I... I’d rather not answer, ma’am,” she said weakly.

“Does anyone else have the answer?” Mrs. Wickham asked. She received sullen stares by way of reply.

“Oh, for goodness’ sakes!” Hermione shouted. “I know Victoria can answer this one, and probably Teddy as well! All of you could, if you’d just apply yourselves!”

“Why don’t they just send you packing to Oxford already, so you’ll quit mucking up our lives!” David seethed.

“Why don’t you want to be smart?” Hermione pleaded with them.

“Who would want to be a horrid priss like you?” Lucinda sneered.

“I just want to get along,” Victoria said softly.

Hermione slammed her textbook closed. “Nineteen,” she said with conviction. “The answer is nineteen.” She stormed out of the Great Hall.

They were in front of her, though, at the base of the stairs – the four of them, hovering around Victoria Fisher who was sprawled on the ground.

“Leave her alone!” Hermione shouted.

“Uh-oh, it’s Her-Majesty,” Ralph laughed. “No worries; she wouldn’t dare get her hands dirty.”

“No, but she’d tattle,” Lucinda pointed out. “She’s like that, you know.”

“I am not!” Hermione huffed.

“Tattler! Tattler!” they all mocked.

“Shove off, Granger,” David Stroud blustered. “This is between us and ickle Vickie.”

Hermione stood her ground. “Get away from her!”

David turned on her. “Or what?” Before she could move, he lashed out and grabbed her by the hair. “I think this gorse-bush needs a trimming,” he cackled.

Her hair blew in the wind. No boy would ever treat her like that, Hermione decided. David Stroud needed a trimming, she figured. All the hair on his head promptly fell out. His eyes grew into saucers, and he released her so fast that she fell to the floor. He crawled around, screaming and scooping up his hair.

Victoria Fisher’s eyes were nearly as big. “How did you...?” Ralph wrapped his arms over his head, as though he were trying to hold his hair in place.

Teddy growled, “She’s a witch!”

Hermione’s Outfit tore at the seams as she grew. Her expanding feet painfully burst her Mary Janes in two.

A wild-eyed Lucinda shrieked, “Burn her!”

David tore a torch from one of the wall sconces, and advanced on her. “Burn her!” he shouted.

The stairs were lined with every student from Worthington Day School... her parents... her neighbours... everyone from Hogwarts...but there was no choice. She threw the tattered remains of The Outfit at David and ran up the stairs as fast as she could manage. Somehow, they stayed on her heels. People were hooting and hollering at her, and tears streamed down her face but she couldn't stop to wipe them away.

They trapped her in the corridor that led to the Gryffindor Common Room, Ralph and Lucinda to one side and Teddy and David to the other. All four carried torches now, and all four were smiling madly. Hermione heard a loud breathing sound, and then "Wheeeeeee!"

So it was that Hermione found herself standing in front of the entrance to the Gryffindor Common Room, whilst Fluffy the three-headed dog devoured her childhood tormentors and Luna Lovegood grinned madly at her from Fluffy's back. She was wearing a summer shirt emblazoned with the words 'I Found a Snorkack' and short pants.

There was a pop! beside Hermione, and an unfamiliar house-elf appeared. It cast a shadow. "Doctor Covelli?" she asked.

The house-elf smiled brightly. "Doctor Covelli wonders where Hermione ever saw a creature such as this," she said, pointing at the three-headed dog, who wagged his tail and belched.

"Oh," Hermione said. "That's Fluffy."

"Doctor Covelli is sure that Hermione has an interesting story to tell!" the house-elf laughed, and motioned to the portrait hole that led into the Common Room. Hermione wasn't particularly surprised that Luna was able to follow them inside.

August 14, 1996

"She hasn't moved in four days," Mrs. Granger said anxiously. "She hasn't eaten, hasn't taken water... I'm trying to understand this, really I am..."

Covelli squinted and rubbed at her temples with her free hand. "Your concerns are reasonable, Mrs. Granger. If I had encountered a patient in this state during my rounds, I would have told her family to prepare for death. I can only assure you that she is asleep, but not in the manner that you understand it."

She studied the Grangers as she sipped water and nibbled at slices of sfusati. Since arriving, they seemed to have slid from being merely wounded to virtually defeated. Mr. Granger cleared his throat and let his bleary eyes fall upon his daughter. "Should we be preparing for her death, then?" he asked, and Mrs. Granger let out a small, strangled sound.

"No," Covelli said firmly. "Her condition is improving. I cannot say when she will awaken, but I believe it will be soon."

Mr. Granger asked. "So this thing... does it work like an amplifier of sorts? Perhaps it merges different sorts of brain..." He sighed. "I suppose I should stop trying to equate all of this to the re..."

Covelli waited a few moments for him to finish his thought, but he did not. "Yes? You were saying?" she prompted.

"I was going to say 'to the real world', " he admitted, "but this is all very real, isn't it?"

Covelli forced herself to smile, despite a mounting headache. "I live in two worlds at once, Mr. Granger, so I do understand your confusion. Sometimes it is hard to come to terms, or even to find the words that explain... ehh... how to say it... dissonance?"

"You're not like the rest of them," Mrs. Granger said, and then quickly added, "I don't mean that badly, of course! It's just that they seem to try so hard to hide, but you... Hermione's professor said that you practiced medicine, which shocked me."

"Just like the rest of the world, the nature of the magical world varies from place to place," Covelli said. "Wizards living in England and most of the old colonial nations tend to be..." She trailed off, not

certain how to explain something that was obvious to four-fifths of the magical world but that might surprise or even offend her patient's parents.

Mr. Granger's brow furrowed. "Tend to be what, exactly? Do we need to add to our concerns?"

"England was the first to enforce secrecy," Covelli explained. "The English were the ones to write the international secrecy statutes and pushed the hardest for them, although most of Europe quickly fell into line. You have to understand a little of the way of things four hundred years ago. This may not be a comfortable discussion."

Mr. Granger appeared interested, and Mrs. Granger voiced no opposition. "Go on... please?" he asked.

"Before the seventeenth century, the people of the larger world were content to burn heretics," Covelli said. "Of course, every country did persecute witches prior to that, but it was uncommon. After the Thirty Years' War, focus shifted from heresy to purity of a sort. They stopped burning each other, and started attempting to burn us. A true witch couldn't have been burned at the stake unless she was unconscious, of course, so nearly all the killing was fruitless. They couldn't burn us, then, but they could burn everything we owned, seize our possessions... strip us of land, titles... and they were much better at that. Separation was as much a matter of economic survival as it was personal survival, you see? Many of the problems in the magical world stem from those days, I believe. It's easy to hate when you live in isolation, and it's easy to blame people who've taken something from you. For those of us from exclusively magical families, it was easy to turn that hate against those who newly joined us – people like your daughter."

Mr. Granger seemed to ponder what Covelli told him, before he nodded in understanding. "The rest looks like simple fanaticism to me," he said. "The magical world isn't so different after all, is it?"

"Not in my experience, no," Covelli admitted.

Mrs. Granger asked abruptly, “Why is England special, then? Why wouldn’t it have been the same everywhere?”

“In much of the world, the line between the magic and the mundane is thinner,” Covelli returned. “Among traditional peoples, folk magic is an accepted part of life. They simply missed all of these troubles, and to them, Europe still seems obsessed with something unimportant. In America, most of the wizards who moved there were independent sorts, like the people around them.”

“It’s such a big place,” Mrs. Granger noted. “I imagine it’s easier to blend.”

Covelli nodded. “I lived in America for more than ten years, in New York City and San Francisco, and you’re correct. You can hide in plain sight quite easily.”

“What about the rest of the world?” Mr. Granger asked.

“The Chinese magical community is well hidden, but that wasn’t the case until fifty years ago or thereabouts,” Covelli went on. “The Australians are more like the Americans than the English.”

“That still doesn’t answer my question –” Mrs. Granger began.

Covelli cut her off. Her headache was growing worse, and she was weary of thinking of English wizards. “The seventeenth century was a particularly complicated time in Britain, because the magical community permeated the noble class,” she lectured. “The magical community was dealing with the English Civil Wars and a major goblin uprising all at once. In England, witch burnings were mostly a thing of the past before the Civil Wars; it was the forfeitures that came later. The landed families in both worlds lost or gained based upon favour, and that changed by the moment. The major English magical families supported Cromwell because the Stuarts had heavily taxed and repressed them, and they paid for it when Charles II was restored. The major Scottish magical families supported the eventual Charles II, and ended up in Cromwell’s path. Everyone knew too much, and the magical community paid dearly. In the aftermath, they all had good reason to demand secrecy; really, it was the only thing

they agreed on. Some of the Scots dabbled in the affairs of state for a while longer – at least two of the clans, though you won't find reference to that in any text – but even they backed away after the Battle of Culloden."

"I see," Mrs. Granger said, though to Covelli's eyes it was apparent that she did not. "Were you raised in England, or are you simply well read?"

"History of Magic was a speciality of mine, long ago, and its connection to the broader world interested me," Covelli admitted. She hesitated, before adding, "I spent most of my childhood in Wales."

"I understand that you were in the same House as Hermione when you attended Hogwarts?" Mrs. Granger asked.

"Yes, I lived in Gryffindor House," Covelli answered quietly.

Mrs. Granger pressed on. "Were you Head Girl, by chance?"

Covelli smiled slightly. "No, I lacked the disposition for it. Professor McGonagall was Head Girl for our year." She paused for a sip of water, and then added, "Is it important to you that Hermione is appointed Head Girl for her year?"

"It's always been important to Hermione," Mrs. Granger answered quickly.

"Suppose that Hermione were to leave this experience with different priorities?" Covelli posed to her. "How would you feel about that?"

Mrs. Granger's brow beetled. "Why would she not wish to be Head Girl? Doesn't every girl at boarding school wish for that?"

"Not every girl, no," Covelli returned evenly.

Mr. Granger squeezed Mrs. Granger's hand. He said, "Perhaps we'll cross that bridge when it comes, eh? We don't know what Hermione will be doing in the fall, let alone next year. Her health and well-being are all that matter now."

“Of... of course,” Mrs. Granger said weakly. “She will be all right... won’t she?”

Covelli closed her eyes. “I believe so. I should return to her now.”

“We’re not to touch her, is that right?” Mr. Granger asked.

“I did not tell you this,” Covelli murmured.

“Professor McGonagall said —” Mrs. Granger began.

“You’re not to... disturb the Dreamweaver,” Covelli managed to say. “Her right hand is free.”

“We’d like to stay with her for a while,” Mr. Granger said.

“Good... very good...” Covelli mumbled. She felt a certain sort of warmth, and knew that Mr. Granger had taken his daughter’s hand.

Hermione felt flat, which was a strange feeling considering that she was quite accustomed to feeling round. She tried to move forward, and then backward, but she could only move from side to side.

“Hello?” she called out.

The sconces responded to her voice, and in the dim light she could see that she was in the Trophy Room. Luna, in jungle garb and wearing a pith helmet, was polishing trophies with a dingy rag and a flask of one of Filch’s cleaners. “Hm, there’s a riddle in this...” she mumbled as she drew closer. “Looks like this one could use a dusting...” Her eyes suddenly brightened. “Hello, Hermione. I wondered where you were off to, but honestly, how can you see through all of that dust?”

Before Hermione could flinch, Luna began to dust her off, but the rag wouldn’t quite reach her face. “That’s better,” Luna said. Then, she turned and called out, “Ron? Harry? She’s back.”

There were two portraits on the opposite wall that she'd never seen before. Ron wore a Weasley jumper and a smirk. Harry's hair was even wilder than in reality and he had a hungry look to him.

Ron's eyes sparkled, and he said, "I was wondering when you'd come around. All you ever do is sleep and dream!"

Harry bore into her with intense eyes. "Hello, Hermione. I've been waiting for you," he said in an unusually husky voice, and she shivered.

Mr. Filch trundled into the room, followed closely by the dreaded Mrs. Norris. "Keep at your work, Lovegood," he growled. "Too batty for Ravenclaw, you are."

"Be a dear and fetch me some tuna, would you?" Mrs. Norris said to Filch. The cat strolled toward Luna, licked her paws, and sat on her haunches. "Isn't this interesting? Why do you all appear as portraits, I wonder?" she mewled.

"We don't change," Ron said.

Harry nodded. "We're always the same, the three of us."

Hermione sighed. "The hero, his friend and the bookworm," she explained.

Luna sat cross-legged on the floor and pulled one of the trophies into her lap. "The doer and the thinker and the one who holds them together – at least that's what I've seen. We all see what we want to see, I suppose."

"The prince, the princess and the jester," Ron said glumly, "that's what people see."

Harry chuckled. "I thought we were the one who looks for trouble, the one who always finds it, and the one who gets us out of it."

“But we do change,” Hermione insisted. “Look at this summer; I mean, everything has changed.”

“Great, just bloody great,” Ron fumed. “Now, I’m the crazy one, Harry’s the rich one, and you’re –” He stopped and his eyes lit. “Wait a minute. You’re the crazy one... so what does that make me?”

“Remain focused on the truth, Hermione,” Mrs. Norris warned. “The voice may sound like your Ron, but it’s only a shadow of you. Do you believe that you’re crazy?”

“Hermione’s no crazier than I am,” Harry said. “Ron’s the id, I’m the ego and Hermione is the superego.”

Mrs. Norris made a strange gasping sound that Hermione decided was laughter. “Wherever did you read about that?”

“She dreams about a fellow named Freud sometimes,” Ron accused.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Not Freud! It’s schadenfreude, and everyone feels that now and again. Tell me you don’t feel good when the Slytherins get their just desserts, Ron. I know you feel like Harry has everything and you don’t, and sometimes you think it’s fair that he suffers in return – don’t you?”

Luna’s mouth formed an ‘O’. “Ronald, is this true? I thought Harry was your friend. I haven’t had many friends, but I didn’t think they behaved this way.”

“That’s not fair,” Ron said sullenly. “I’m tired of people expecting us to be the same all the time. I’m not a portrait.”

“I’m changing,” Harry insisted. “You’ll see.”

“Look at what I did for Ginny,” Ron went on. “I didn’t do that because I wanted something for it, or because I owed her. I did it because it was Ginny, and somebody had to save her. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his sister... or his friends.”

“What did you say?” Hermione shouted.

“Greater love hath no woman than this, that she lay down her life for her friend,” Harry accused. “I thought you were going to lay down, Hermione.”

“That phrase,” Mrs. Norris mused, “it’s the connection to the book you were holding, isn’t it?”

“It’s from the Gospel according to John,” Harry explained. “It was a gift from my master.”

Hermione blinked back tears. “I was going to lay down, Harry, I swear it!”

“Let’s change,” Harry said. “I’m ready to change.”

Ron beamed. “It’s about time, mate!” Just as Dr. Covelli’s hand had reached out for Hermione before, Ron began to come out of the portrait – first a canvas leg extended, then a hand and arm, and then the rest. He shook furiously, and the canvas shed from him in bits. “There! Right as rain! Come out, Hermione!”

“I don’t know if I can change,” she whispered.

“Everyone can change,” Mrs. Norris offered.

“Into what?” Hermione asked. “Don’t I need to know that first?”

“Life is an uncertainty,” Mrs. Norris said.

Hermione moved forward and the room sparkled and she crackled, and then she was standing next to Ron and he was hugging her. “Good for you,” he whispered into her ear.

Luna dropped the trophy in her lap, and it struck the floor with a clang. Thick black smoke poured out of it that quickly took the form of Tom Riddle. “What’s keeping you, Harry?” Riddle asked. “It’s time to change.”

Ron quickly moved in front of Hermione. "Stay away from her!" he growled.

Riddle laughed. His skin turned to pale grey and his face reshaped itself into something inhuman. "Fear this, if you wish," he sneered, "but even if you have the courage to name it, that won't save you. Fearing me won't be enough." He reached a skeletal hand toward Harry's portrait. "Come out, come out, whatever you are..."

Harry stared at Hermione with the same hungry look as before. She found herself drawn toward his dark eyes, but Ron held her back. Mrs. Norris hissed. Harry moved forward, but it wasn't his arm that came forth from the portrait. A huge canvas snake kept coming and coming and coming, until it formed a huge coil at the centre of the room. With one powerful quiver, it shed the canvas, and advanced on Hermione with unnatural speed. She couldn't move, couldn't pull herself away from the snake's brilliant green eyes. She just stood there, as its mouth opened wider and wider. Ron pulled at her arm desperately but she was rooted in place.

Mrs. Norris leapt at the head of the snake and tore at his eyes with talon-like claws. "Return to the Common Room, now!" she yowled. Luna jostled Hermione hard, and together with Ron they ran into the corridor and up the endless stairs. Ron insisted on standing guard outside the portrait hole. Hermione followed Luna inside.

There were no books, no bric-a-brac, no tables; there was no squashy couch, and there was no fire. There was nothing at all in the Common Room excepting Luna, and Hermione sank to the floor. Mrs. Norris scampered into the room. Like an Animagus transformation, the cat resolved itself into Dr. Covelli.

"Everything's gone!" Hermione shouted. "I tried to change, and everything's gone!"

Luna waved her hands and they were filled by an upside-down copy of the Quibbler. "Not everything," she said.

"All of your corridors lead to the same place," Dr. Covelli said. "We need to go there soon."

“I just want it to be over,” Hermione wept. “I’m so tired.”

Luna tossed the paper aside and it disappeared. She extended her hand, and helped Hermione to stand. “Please don’t push us away,” she said. “You need to come home.”

Hermione looked around. “Us? What ‘us’? There’s only you,” she sniffed.

Luna grinned strangely. “You can’t see the rest of us because you don’t want to see,” she said.

“You do need to come home soon,” Dr. Covelli agreed. “It’s been too long.”

“I’m afraid,” Hermione whispered.

“When you know your fears – when you can name them and know if they’re real or imagined – then it will be time to come home,” Dr. Covelli said. “I want you to relax, close your eyes, and think of your couch and your books. They belong to you.” After a pause, she told Hermione, “Open your eyes.” The shelves were full and the couch sat before a roaring fire.

“I have to go,” Luna said. “Please come home. We’ll look after you, I promise.”

“Why do you have to go?” Hermione asked. “Stay, please?”

“We’re so close to the Snorkacks, though.” Luna took a deep breath. “I can smell them. You’ll tell me what you want me to know.” She turned to Dr. Covelli. “Please send her home.”

There was a loud commotion outside the portrait hole, and Ron shouted, “Bloody hell! Someone fetch Hagrid!”

“My ride is here,” Luna said, and she drifted out of the room.

Dr. Covelli led Hermione to the couch, and sat beside her. "I want you to relax and close your eyes again. This time, think of a pensieve. Can you see the shape of the bowl, and the colour? Good. Open your eyes." There was a pensieve on the floor between their feet and the fire.

"I have to do this, don't I?" Hermione asked.

Dr. Covelli nodded. "It's time to talk about Voldemort," she said.

Hermione sighed. "And Harry," she added. "There's no talking about one without the other."

August 15, 1996

McGonagall leaned forward with her elbows on the bed, hands clasped together almost as though she were praying. "This is interminable, Albus," she muttered.

"Neither has cried out for thirty minutes or more," Dumbledore responded. "That is a positive sign."

"It could as easily mean that they are both lost," McGonagall pointed out.

"They are not lost," Dumbledore said firmly.

McGonagall's reserve had chipped away over the hours. Mr. Granger's series of tongue-lashings directed at both she and Dumbledore had shaken her, and she had a headache, and she wanted nothing so much as a pleasant cup of tea and a book, and to see Hermione Granger stir, and to know that Covelli hadn't managed to kill herself with yet another audacious and foolish risk. She fixed Dumbledore with her steeliest and most fearsome glare. "Do you know they are not lost, or are you simply ordering that it be so?" she demanded to know.

“At the moment, there is no difference between conviction and reality,” Dumbledore said. He had the unmitigated gall to smile slightly, and McGonagall felt a sudden impulse to wrap her hands around his neck.

“Well... well... that’s just brilliant, isn’t it?” she snipped. “This way, when they awaken, you can claim omnipotence. If they do not, then you can shrug and claim fate!”

Dumbledore sagged; in an instant, his face changed. McGonagall thought that he looked impossibly old, as old as Hogwarts. “I have lost your trust, as well?” he asked.

McGonagall pursed her lips, and tried to answer without overthinking. “Albus... I have known you far too long to distrust you, exactly... but over the last year...” She sighed. “I supported you when you said that circumstances were too unsettled to take a stand, even as Umbridge deposed you and all but imprisoned the rest of us. I supported you when you chose to distance yourself from Mr. Potter, because you assured us that it was necessary. I supported you when you brought Order recruitment to a halt, even against my better judgment. I was still there, Albus, until they attacked Hagrid and... I was there to reap what you sowed. I admit that I was blinded to some of it; had I known that Umbridge was using a blood quill to punish students, I would have –”

Dumbledore’s eyes came to life. He released Hermione’s free hand and his hands shook. His voice was quiet and level and terribly dangerous. “Please repeat your last statement, Minerva.”

McGonagall gasped, and nearly let go of Covelli’s hand. “I... I...”

“NOW!” Dumbledore ordered.

McGonagall proceeded in the way of a first-year student hauled before the Headmaster. “Miss Granger told me that Harry Potter and other students were made to write lines using a blood quill, just before her last... episode.” She stopped for a moment, recovered some of herself, and went on, “I know that she wasn’t in her right

mind, but she described the results from a blood quill in an accurate manner.”

Dumbledore’s eyes squeezed shut, and he took up Hermione’s hand again. After a lengthy silence, he said, “I failed them. I failed all of them.”

“I... of course, you did what you thought was right,” McGonagall offered nervously.

“That is not enough. In isolation, that is never enough,” Dumbledore said flatly, his eyes still closed.

“Albus, I’m not sure that I completely understand...” McGonagall began.

Dumbledore paid her no notice. His eyes were brimmed with moisture, as they opened and took in Hermione and Covelli. “A blood quill... by the grace of Merlin...” He wiped at his eyes, and his voice hardened. “I have wronged the both of you. I have wronged poor Harry, even as I have tried to protect him. Now you both lie here because of what I have wrought, and Harry has run from us –”

McGonagall instantly wanted to shout but forced herself to stay quiet. Dumbledore reached out and brushed the hair from Hermione’s eyes, and McGonagall felt a catch in her throat at the gesture. He looked every inch a grandfather, she thought.

“I am sorry, as sorry as a person can be,” Dumbledore said softly. “I have failed you. I shall not fail you again.” He squeezed Hermione’s hand tightly for a moment. McGonagall thought she saw a faint white light around his hand for a moment. She bit her lip, and wondered if it was possible that she’d seen him cast an oath.

She cleared her throat, and quickly asked the question she had held back. “Where has Harry gone?”

Dumbledore looked up blankly for a moment, but quickly returned to a demeanour more befitting of a Headmaster. “He has journeyed to the ancestral lands of Clan Black. It seems to suit him well, and for that I

am glad. He has even struck up relations with a young lady from the nearby village.”

McGonagall’s lips thinned. “What sort of relations?”

“Nothing of the sort that would threaten the young lady’s virtue,” Dumbledore promised with a faint smirk, “or Mr. Potter’s virtue, for that matter —”

A low, faint groan immediately captured their attention. Covelli groaned again, then winced, and then gasped. The chain that bound Hermione’s hand to hers fell away and coiled atop the bed sheet. She brought her knees toward her chest, then rolled to one side, and coughed until her face turned violently red.

“Lucia!” McGonagall cried out. She sat on the edge of the bed and patted at Covelli’s back. There was a flutter behind her; she turned her head, to see the Dreamweaver roll itself into a thick cylinder that came to rest on Hermione’s stomach. Dumbledore appeared to be checking Hermione’s pulse in Muggle fashion.

“Oh, my God,” Covelli groaned over and over. McGonagall tried to right her, but quickly gave up the effort and used her wand instead.

McGonagall waved her hand before blank eyes. “Can you hear me?” Covelli’s eyes abruptly slammed shut and she grimaced.

Dumbledore announced, “Miss Granger is asleep, and very soundly so.”

Covelli took a deep, slow breath, shuddering all the while. “He’s horrible... you can’t imagine... he’s horrible...”

Dumbledore slowly walked around the bed. “I take it that you’ve now seen Voldemort?”

“Seen him?” Covelli laughed hysterically. “Seen him, felt him, been torn to ribbons by him!”

"You have reviewed Miss Granger's memories?" Dumbledore asked, concerned.

Covelli shook her head without opening her eyes in the slightest. "I lived them," she blurted out. "I had her see a pensieve in her mind. Dreadful idea... stupid..." She muttered a string of Italian, and then sighed. "It was effective, and that was blind luck."

McGonagall summoned a quilt from across the room, and efficiently wrapped it around Covelli. "What do you mean when you say 'it was effective'?" she asked.

Covelli pulled the quilt tighter. "Thank you," she said dutifully, and then slowly explained, "Hermione needed to accomplish two things in order to safely leave the Dreamweaver: she needed to distinguish between dreams and reality, and she needed to see a distinction between truth and falsehood. Without these things, she was trapped by her fears. That doesn't mean she accepts the distinctions, of course, but she needed to see them." She inclined her head toward the sleeping girl. "It was effective, and now the real work begins."

McGonagall's eyebrows shot up. "The real work? What have we been watching?"

Covelli shook her head. She answered McGonagall as though talking to a seventh-year, which did not sit well. "She cannot remain here forever. She will have to function in the world, which can be difficult at times for all of us. Hermione after this experience will not be the same as Hermione prior; she cannot be the same. She can either shape the differences, or be shaped by the flow of daily life. I will give her the means to exert control."

"You know how to do this?" Dumbledore asked.

"That is my work; that is what I have trained to do," Covelli snapped.

Dumbledore told her, "I am impressed." Covelli's mouth dropped open as though to speak, then quickly closed just as he added, "How much time will this require?"

“Water?” Covelli asked. McGonagall quickly fetched a small cup, and Covelli took several small sips. She cleared her throat before she responded, “Years, perhaps. Your Voldemort, he is a monster – a horrible monster. He found every fear, every desire, everything. To break the ties... it was like cutting at a cancer that has spread. The intellect, it is there. The spirit, it has to come back.”

“It is my fervent hope that Miss Granger will be with us in the fall,” Dumbledore said, in a manner that McGonagall did not take as a request.

“That is rather unlikely,” Covelli immediately returned.

Dumbledore responded with equal speed. “I shall procure your exclusive services, if required. Suitable housing will be provided in Hogsmeade or within the castle, as you may prefer.”

Covelli blinked at Dumbledore, and then began to laugh nervously. “Do you... have you any idea how much this would cost? I rather doubt that your governing board –”

“I shall personally procure your services, Doctor Covelli,” Dumbledore clarified.

“I have teaching obligations –” Covelli advanced.

“Break them,” Dumbledore demanded.

Covelli’s right eyebrow climbed. “Why?”

Dumbledore removed his spectacles and seemed to study them intently. “I need you,” he said, “which most likely displeases you, but there you are. I have failed Miss Granger. I have failed others in the past, and I choose not to do so again. If she does not return to us, she may not fulfil her considerable potential.”

“I see,” Covelli said flatly, her arms now crossed.

“I also fear that Mr. Potter might be quite lost in her absence,” Dumbledore added.

Covelli frowned. "Your Mr. Potter is not my responsibility."

Dumbledore returned his spectacles to their place. "I understand that Mr. Potter is not your patient, but —"

"Hermione has made some interesting observations," Covelli cut him off. "I believe that they are subconscious or even preconscious. In either case, she is bound by them and resisting their implications." She stared at Dumbledore pointedly. "At the moment, I have not decided whether Mr. Potter relates to the problem or the solution." She shuddered beneath the quilt, and added, "As for the rest, I prefer to put it aside for now."

Intermezzo II

FOUND

August 19, 1996

Covelli had quickly become familiar with the real Hermione Granger's mannerisms. Some were different than those of the dream-state Hermione – more protective, even forced. Some were the same – the girl worried her lip while working through a problem, for example. A few were eerily reminiscent of Minnie – a certain look of disapproval, among other things. When Harry Potter's name had been mentioned, she had at first been prone to hug her knees and worry her lip. In the last two sessions, it was clear that Hermione had wanted to avoid any mention of the Potter boy; when she slipped, the girl still worried her lip but then turned her attention to the view of the azure sea and the whitewashed walls of Positano and the beach far below.

They had met two or three times each day, depending upon energy and interest. Hermione had awakened from the Dreamweaver with a voracious appetite for food and for information. Covelli had quickly determined that Hermione read somewhat faster than she did, and was duly impressed; however, the girl tended to accept the written word on its face. This was more a product of inexperience than simple naïveté, in Covelli's opinion, but bore watching given the girl's very specific and very peculiar book requests since waking. Covelli had fulfilled the requests through personal contacts and had decided to keep that information from Dumbledore and even Minnie for now; she was more interested in observing the girl's thought processes than in dealing with the pontification of her teachers.

The Grangers reminded Covelli of paired university faculty whom she had known over the years, and Hermione was in some respects the typical product of those sorts of unions. She was an almost painful perfectionist and an introvert by inclination; thus she had built her persona around acts of overcompensation for insecurities and self-identified flaws. Four days of taking meals with the Granger family had made it clear that Mrs. Granger fuelled this behaviour and had likely instilled it. Hermione was rather like her father in interests and

temperament, but was compelled both internally and externally to be like her mother. She had a very strong need for self-control, and a modest desire to control broader circumstances that manifested itself in a tendency to adopt causes.

The net effect of all this was mildly self-destructive, but no more so than was the case for many gifted young people. Her parents not only were inclined to dote upon her, but also clearly loved her. They had accepted Hermione's unique qualities to a remarkable degree. She reported few friends, but those friends were close, or at least had been close prior to recent events. On the whole, Covelli was satisfied that Hermione would not have found her way into care if not for that vecchio schifoso, that horrible Voldemort. Now, the girl had to reckon with the old demons as well as the new.

Covelli leaned quietly against a pillar and watched Hermione, who sat at the glass-topped table on the loggia. There was a bag filled with books set atop the table; one was opened and stuffed with pages of notes. Beside the bag was a mostly-blank piece of paper that Covelli knew well. Hermione absently twirled a biro in her fingers, and her front teeth had a firm grasp on her lower lip. Covelli waited for quite a while, to see if the biro would touch the paper.

When it did not, she walked into view and asked, "How are you coming with the assignment?"

Hermione looked out over the balustrade and toward the sea. "Oh... the assignment... I... yes..." She manoeuvred the single piece of paper beneath the bag with a minimum of fuss. "It's... interesting, this one."

Covelli strolled to the balustrade, and leant atop the ornately carved stone. "It is interesting in what way?"

Hermione let out a low growl, pushed back roughly in her chair, sprang to her feet, and began to pace. "You asked a deceptive question. I've been overthinking it, exactly as you pointed out."

Covelli tried not to grin at the girl's faintly hopeful sidelong glance. "There is no need to curry favour with me," she said lightly. "Perhaps

you have not been overthinking the question? Perhaps the question lies at the junction of so many paths that it is difficult for you to offer a coherent answer?" Hermione said nothing, but her pacing became forceful. Covelli turned her own attention to the deep blue waters that shone in the late morning sun, and waited.

"It's a false premise, the whole thing!" Hermione snapped. "What do you mean, 'when I am perfect?' That's impossible to achieve... hence the falseness of it all?"

"The question simply asks you to state the expected result of personal perfection: 'when I am perfect, then' fill in the blank," Covelli said impassively.

Hermione angrily toppled one of the chairs. "Nothing, because it can't be done! There! Are you satisfied now? It can't be done!"

Covelli watched the girl carefully, but remained still and projected calm. "True, but you can control your response to that realization," she assured her. "Breathe deeply... remember that you guide the magic; the magic does not guide you..."

Hermione took a single deep breath, and then moved quickly to right the chair. "It can't be done," she said, trembling. "I can't do it, I... I can't do this anymore... what am I going to do?"

"Let's sit," Covelli suggested. "We can watch the water, if you like. Perhaps I can offer answers to the question, and you can decide for yourself if they are true." Hermione slumped into the chair she had righted without a word.

"If I am perfect, then I will be successful," Covelli offered. "If I am perfect, then I will be respected... I will change the world for the better... I will make others around me better, because I can keep them from making mistakes... people will like me better... good will triumph over evil... I will save people..." Hermione hugged her knees, which she hadn't done for two days, and Covelli took a mental note.

"It can't be done," Hermione said dejectedly. "I can't be perfect, so I suppose I can't manage any of those things, not completely."

“Remember... garbage in, garbage out,” Covelli chided her.

Hermione groaned, but a sigh and an upward flicker of the corner of her mouth soon subsumed her scowl. “Fine, then. I suppose the correct answer is that I can’t manage any of those things completely, on my own, any more than I can be perfect.”

“You’ve been hearing me,” Covelli noted.

“It’s an obvious extension of your point of view, and it does make sense,” Hermione admitted. “I can accept it, but at the same time part of me insists that it’s completely untrue.”

Covelli turned the question around. “What is most bothersome about the idea that you cannot be perfect? Why does your mind lead you to insist upon something that you yourself acknowledge is an impossibility?”

“Because I have to be perfect; I have to be the best,” Hermione returned. “Even if I didn’t have to do it for Harry, I’d have to do it because of what I am.” Her voice took on an acid edge. “I’ll be first and best because a Muggle-born has to be, and I’m the one to do it; then we’ll see how those smug, loathsome –” She stopped abruptly, and her cheeks coloured.

Covelli reassured the girl, “You needn’t concern yourself with offending me, and you wouldn’t be the only first-generation witch to overachieve.” She paused intentionally, and then added, “Is this something you feel on behalf of all of your peers, or is this something more personal?”

Hermione brightened. “First-generation... I like that. It’s more hopeful... more accurate, as well.” Covelli kept observing her, until at last she sighed and answered, “I suppose it’s personal.”

“Why do you think this is the case?” Covelli asked.

Hermione moved immediately to answer, but then seemed to weigh her words before speaking; when she answered, her tone – her

whole posture – was strident. “It’s because I won’t be explained away with a word. Magic is about power and knowledge, not about lineage. Many of the weakest wizards and the worst students at Hogwarts are purebloods. They act like magic is something to be handed them.”

“You aren’t fond of entitlement,” observed Covelli.

Hermione crossed her arms. “When people work hard and do their best, they should advance. Laziness and sloth shouldn’t be rewarded.”

“Yet people advance based upon whom they know and upon the favours they are owed, in both the greater world and in the magical world,” Covelli pointed out.

“The wizarding world shouldn’t be like that,” Hermione snapped.

Covelli quickly asked, “Why should it be different?”

“Look at the power that witches and wizards wield! They’re obligated to be different!” Hermione insisted.

“Yet a witch is governed by the same passions and temptations and falsehoods as any woman,” Covelli returned.

“They should be better; they should rise above that...” Hermione protested, but she sounded as though her heart wasn’t completely in the protest.

She says ‘they’, not ‘we’, Covelli noted to herself, and wondered if Hermione had ever felt as though she belonged anywhere at all. She held the thought inside, and simply said, “Some will, and some will not.”

“Harry will,” Hermione said, “he’s always been better than that, he’s always been... he was just good, you know?”

“And now he is somehow not good?” Covelli immediately asked.

Hermione fidgeted in her chair. “I... I’m not sure now... you saw it... what happened there...”

“You know very well what I saw of the events at your home,” said Covelli. “I ask you again, is Harry Potter no longer good?”

“I can’t be certain. I’m not certain of anything,” Hermione said with an air of desperation.

Covelli moved the conversation slightly to one side. “Does this flow from Voldemort’s accusations?”

Hermione’s eyes widened, but she kept them focused firmly on the balustrade. She worked through her response as though negotiating a cursed tomb; the effort showed clearly on her face. “Not so much what was said, no... it’s more something that I felt... which is not exactly comfortable to... I just... I need to consult more texts... I hope you’re able to secure Abramova’s scroll, in particular.” She took a long breath, and retreated behind a cool, composed façade. “I prefer to rule out as many possibilities as I can before saying any more.”

Covelli watched Hermione betray the façade by wringing her hands, and then changed the subject. “Have you found the Repeating Journal useful?”

Hermione noticeably relaxed. “Yes, I have. It’s been nice to communicate with someone else, someone away from here... not that I don’t appreciate what you’re doing for me. I know that you’ve not allowed magic in your home, and –”

Covelli laughed. “I’m afraid that particular ship sailed two weeks ago, Hermione... and I prefer that you cease your apologies. It has all been necessary. You are satisfied with your choice of correspondent, then?”

Hermione smiled and shook her head. “Yes... and I still don’t know why I chose Luna. She’s the strangest girl sometimes, but she’s so... I don’t know... accepting? I feel as though I could tell her anything without being judged for it.”

“That is a rare commodity in a friend,” Covelli observed. “Treasure it... there is something else?”

Hermione looked shocked for a moment. “I want you to teach me how you do that.”

Covelli was puzzled. “I’m sorry?”

“You read me so easily,” Hermione said. “I want to learn how to do that.”

“That which you see is the product of seventy years of intent people-watching, and decades of schooling and experience,” Covelli explained. “It will come for you in time, to at least some degree. Now... there is something else?”

Hermione nodded uncertainly. “Luna cast a shadow, in the dreams. Did you see it?”

Covelli thought for a moment, but found no value in stating anything other than the truth. “I did, and I have no explanation to offer.”

Hermione’s voice fell to a whisper. “I think she was actually there. I suppose that sounds mad, but some of the things she’s written in the journal...”

“She was actually present in your dream, before you were attacked – isn’t that right?” Covelli pointed out.

Hermione nodded, and then seemed to disappear into her own thoughts. Covelli watched and waited, until the girl’s head suddenly lifted, her eyes wide. “Could Luna have been the reason the dream was shared?”

Covelli pursed her lips. “She wasn’t present throughout, so that seems unlikely on first thought. Still, it is interesting how quickly she understood that she had been present in a mutual dream. Perhaps you should ask her opinion?”

“I’ll think about it...” Hermione said, before she once again pulled inside herself.

Covelli decided to draw her out once more, before leaving her to her thoughts. “Hermione? Have you given any more thought to my recommendation about the pensieve?”

The girl began to wring her hands again. “I don’t know... I don’t know if I can do it... how many times can a person re-live something like that?”

“Remember that what you experienced in the dream-state is very different than the normal experience of reviewing a memory in a pensieve,” Covelli reminded her. “I still believe that you would benefit from the detachment that a pensieve would provide –”

“I’ll think about it, all right?” Hermione snapped. She sighed deeply, and repeated, “I’ll think about it.”

“I shan’t bring it up again, then,” Covelli promised.

“I’ve decided, on the other thing,” Hermione blurted out.

Covelli was thrown off for a moment. “To which other thing do you refer?”

“The Dreamweaver... I’d like to make one... if you haven’t changed your mind,” Hermione mumbled nervously.

Covelli reached out, and took up Hermione’s hands. Thank goodness, she thought. “I haven’t changed my mind. I believe you’ll benefit from both the process and the product.”

Hermione’s expression was at once frightened and expectant. “Is there any advance reading? I imagine that there’s little more than the survey materials I’ve already seen, but I...”

Covelli shook her head. “The crafting of a Dreamweaver has been kept an oral tradition, for both practical and emotional reasons. If you

wish to read today, do it for your own pleasure. We'll talk more of this after the evening meal, if you're so inclined."

* * * * *

August 23, 1996

"Dumbledore's mad! He's gone completely 'round the twist!" Hermione shouted.

"Hermione, shouting changes nothing," Covelli counselled. "Are you certain that this is not one of your friend's detours, as you say?"

"There's nothing at all fanciful about it," Hermione insisted. "See for yourself."

Covelli demurred. "The Repeating Journals are charmed so that none besides the correspondents may read the pages."

Hermione's agitated hands immediately fell to her sides. "You were serious about that? Honestly, I assumed that you were following the conversation."

Covelli frowned. "I told you that your communication through the journals would be entirely your own. I would not have said so, had I meant otherwise."

"Is there a way to counter the charm?" Hermione asked urgently.

Covelli nodded. "If you wish for me to read the pages, touch the inside of the front cover with your wand and say 'I wish to share'; the instructions will appear."

Hermione quickly took in the complex charm, and made it possible for Covelli to read on her own. The girl quickly turned the pages, and jabbed at a particular point. "Start here," she said.

Luna, I'm having a difficult time following you. Harry took you from the tower, and you saw Ron seeking solace? What does that mean?

Ron is as wounded as the rest of us. He was with Harry's companion, on the beach, and –

Harry's companion?

I failed to mention the girl from the village who Harry has taken up with?

Harry took up with a girl?

Yes, with Professor Lupin's daughter.

I'm sorry, Professor Lupin has a daughter? This daughter lives near the Black Tower and has taken up with Harry? When did this happen?

The birth took place in 1979, so I presume this happened sometime in the latter part of 1978. I don't think that she lives in St. Ebb except for the holidays.

Luna!! When did she take up with Harry? When did you find out that Professor Lupin has a daughter?

Harry took up with her sometime before we arrived. I found out that she was the Professor's daughter on the 20th. I believe Professor Lupin found out on the 19th, but I'm not certain about that.

Never mind that for now. I don't understand what this has to do with Dumbledore abandoning Harry.

I'm sorry. I thought that you wished me to recount the entire story.

Succinctly, please? There's no need for you to begin with the formation of the universe.

There's no need for you to be insulting.

I'm sorry. I'm just terribly worried.

Very well. I promise that I will omit the formation of the universe from my explanation.

Luna!! I'm worried about Harry.

I thought I understood you to say that you are frightened of Harry, or something to that effect. You are worried, as well?

I said that I was frightened of him? That's not exactly the case. It's much more complicated than that. I promise that I'll explain it to you later. Now please, explain to me how this relates to Dumbledore abandoning Harry?

Professor Lupin warned off Harry, as I understand it. He did not want his daughter endangered. This struck me as rather protective for a man who just acquired a daughter, but I suppose that daddies are prone to be protective. Harry didn't take to this very well. He has a certain carnal attraction to this woman.

Carnal? Explain immediately, please!

Hermione, who was peering over Covelli's shoulder, reached around and turned two more pages. "There... from... from there," she spluttered.

Covelli stared resolutely at the pages, to keep from laughing. Regrettably, Hermione saw her mouth twitching. "I do care about Harry, you know," the girl insisted. "I've seen what happens when he gets crossed up with the wrong sort of girl, and it's a painful sight!"

For her part, Covelli simply nodded and pressed on with the text. Hermione was truly agitated, and she needed to understand why.

You're telling me that Harry threw everyone out?

Yes. Harry nearly destroyed the great hall of the tower, and then demanded that everyone leave. When Professor Lupin refused, there was a terrible row. Harry said something to Miss Tonks, and she struck him very hard in the face. I didn't see any of this, but Daddy told me of it later. I did see blood coming from Harry's mouth, before we left. Headmaster Dumbledore came after that, and ordered everyone to leave.

Then it was Dumbledore who forced everyone away?

Yes.

Everyone?

The Headmaster ordered everyone to leave. I already wrote that. I shall strive to make my handwriting more legible.

You mean that Dumbledore sent away the people guarding Harry?

Harry's minders also left. They were a part of everyone, after all. Daddy was not inclined to leave, but we did have appointments to keep in the north country.

But what about the Death Eaters? What about Voldemort?

I do not know what to say. It appeared that the Headmaster was unconcerned about this. Daddy insists that the various magical creatures of the region will protect Harry, should it prove necessary.

Harry's never been on his own. How is he supposed to get along?

Harry is resourceful. He will manage, I expect.

I suppose you're right. I'm sure it won't be for long. Besides, I can't imagine Dumbledore simply left Harry there. He must have some sort of protection in place.

I do not believe that is the case. The Headmaster simply left. Harry did not seem inclined to welcome him back.

But that's completely mad!

It's not completely mad. It does seem rather barmy on the Headmaster's part, doesn't it?

Everyone just fell into line with Dumbledore, then? Everyone left?

I do not think that most people are inclined to question the Headmaster. You seem to be so inclined.

I've found the last month rather eye-opening.

I see. You have discovered that the Headmaster is flawed. This seems to be a very well kept secret in wizarding circles. Perhaps Daddy should run a story, an exposé of some kind?

Oh, that's rich. I'm sure Dumbledore would be thrilled.

Really? Do you think so?

No, not really.

Ah. Never mind, then.

Hermione pointed accusingly at the book. "See? He's gone mad! Absolutely barking!"

Covelli shook her head, then read it again, and then slowly set down the journal. "It's surely difficult to understand, I'll grant you. Still, you're responding to a single point of view, one that even you have described as erratic." She gestured to one of the two chairs adjacent to the desk. "You've been obsessing since you awoke from the Dreamweaver, Hermione, and I do not lightly employ the term. I have seen some of your notes, left open in the library... the texts you are requesting, the subjects you are exploring... I have concerns."

Hermione sat down heavily. "I know that I've been... tightly focussed. It's just that I can't get it out of my head, you know? You just don't understand, Dr. Covelli... Harry can't be left alone like that... he can't... he needs someone to help him... it's a terrible mistake..." She clenched and unclenched her fists. "How could Dumbledore do this? Doesn't he see it? Can't he see...?"

"I am concerned about you, Hermione. I am only concerned about Harry Potter by extension." Covelli took in a deep breath, held it for a moment, and then forced herself to ask, "What is it that Dumbledore can't see?" She waited for an answer while Hermione fidgeted and worried her lip.

Hermione blurted out, "They feel the same," and then hugged her knees to her chest.

Covelli felt a phantom chill. "They feel the same?" She gripped the edge of her desk tightly, and her mind began to spin against her will. With four words, everything changed. No, I don't want to understand this, she thought, and then the thought swirled into the abyss. She couldn't help herself; she began to put it all together.

Potter had felt right to Hermione, in the shared dream, but Sirius Black had been Voldemort in disguise. So many things were off about him – Hermione had even pointed them out upon second viewing – but she had missed them at the time, because Sirius Black had felt so familiar.

At the Grangers' house, Voldemort said that he understood Potter's attraction to her, even as it reviled him. She had accepted what Voldemort had told her as the truth, almost as though part of her instinctively trusted him.

Hermione's own mind had tried to solve the problem, in the Dreamweaver. Tom Riddle seemed terribly familiar to her, almost comforting at first; when she wanted to run, her feet sunk into the stone. Later, Riddle had turned Harry into a serpent; she'd been rooted in place and couldn't run away...

“Voldemort and Harry Potter... they feel the same in your mind... but how...?” For a moment, the safe confines of her villa and the damp desolation of 1945 were as one. The panic rose inside her, and something else with it – I should have sent the girl away, she shouted inside. All of it had to be buried deep within for now; there was quite enough fear and panic emanating from her patient. “Tell me how they feel the same,” she demanded. “Spare no details.”

She knew instantly that her voice had gone as cold as ice; Hermione stared at her with wide fretful eyes and raised eyebrows. Covelli saw in her mind’s eye a wickedly funny boy with curly dark hair who she should have killed when she’d had the opportunity, who Dumbledore could easily have killed and spared the magical world thirty years of grief. Dumbledore could have killed him and saved her brother and her friends, the last casualties of an old war who, as it turned out, were also the first casualties of a war to come. She silently cursed herself for accidentally giving the poor confused girl before her a small taste of what Lucia Greengrass had become, fifty-one summers past. She knew that she would have to summon Dumbledore now, and she knew that either old wounds would be healed or old regrets would be multiplied beyond measure, or perhaps both.

Hermione began by recounting largely the same observations that Covelli had herself pulled together. She carefully described some of her feelings as Voldemort had alternately tempted and tortured her, holding her inside his mind and forcing himself inside hers for a few seconds that to her had lasted for the lion’s share of an hour.

Covelli silently took it all in, and tried to make sense of what she was told. It was clear that Hermione was holding something back, something that in some way was less acceptable than the unexpected similarity between her close friend and the most feared dark wizard in a century. “How does this relate to your reading choices?” she asked.

Hermione stiffened. "I'm trying to understand why," she answered, which wasn't really an answer at all; it only confirmed what Covelli had easily surmised.

"Some of the information you sought; things I have not been able to obtain... Hermione, these things are most likely reserved to the grimoires of the darkest of families," Covelli said. "Do you believe that Voldemort has cast a spell of some sort on Harry Potter – a spell involving possession, perhaps?"

"They have a connection that doesn't depend on a spell," Hermione returned. "The curse scar on Harry's forehead is proof of that. I need to know why they're connected. Voldemort was changing himself somehow, before he killed Harry's parents. The Killing Curse cast on Harry backfired; everyone knows that, but it shouldn't have happened. It should have killed Harry, but it didn't. Harry received some kind of protection from his mother, but..." She worried her lip and rocked back and forth. "That shouldn't have been enough, right? It's niggled at me for the longest time, but now... I don't know... there must have been so many threads of complex magic at work, all at once..." She looked up, and nervousness and fear streamed out of her eyes. "It shouldn't have happened. I... I need to know why Harry's still alive."

Covelli walked to the door of her office, opened it and leaned into the corridor. "Gina!" she shouted, followed by a torrent of Italian. She received a guttural reply. McGonagall strode into the office two minutes later. She was drawn and pale.

"Hermione, it's good to see you looking yourself again," she said briskly. "I was just reviewing some correspondence. What's this all about?"

"Dumbledore left Harry alone, completely alone! It's... it's outrageous!" Hermione fumed before Covelli could manage a single word.

McGonagall's expression barely changed, but Covelli saw the flicker in her eyes. It was clear that her words were carefully chosen. "I am aware of the situation. Headmaster Dumbledore has conveyed his

rationale to myself and selected others. Dr. Covelli, might I speak to you in the corridor for a moment?"

Hermione's hands shot to her hips. "Professor, I do not appreciate being treated like a fool or an invalid," she said in a way that Covelli found surprisingly commanding for the girl's age and station.

"Miss Granger!" McGonagall snapped.

Covelli held up a hand. "Hermione, would you please allow me to speak with your professor? There are things which must be said that are... personal in nature."

Hermione lowered her hands slightly. "I understand," she said flatly.

Covelli ushered McGonagall into the corridor. She closed the door to the office firmly. "Minnie..."

McGonagall had already cast a silent space around them. "Don't 'Minnie' me!" she hissed. "I do not appreciate the level of disrespect you seem to be cultivating in Hermione. It is hardly consistent with a successful experience at Hogwarts!"

"She comes by her opinion of Dumbledore honestly," Covelli sneered. "Given her circumstances, she would be wise to stand up for herself; it seems unlikely anyone else will do it on her behalf!"

"It is not her place to question —" McGonagall began.

Covelli cut her off angrily. "He'd better be answerable to someone! Whose place is it, then — yours? If it is, explain to me why Dumbledore would walk away from the once and future saviour of the magical world in what sounds remarkably like a fit of pique?"

McGonagall sighed. "I know... I know... his reasoning brings to mind the tossing of a young child off a pier to see if he can swim. Several have already insisted on the presence of distant observers, at a minimum. I believe that one of our company may be conspiring to send a house-elf to Harry."

“Well, that should frighten any villains lurking about,” Covelli mocked.

“How did Hermione learn of this?” McGonagall asked.

“She has been corresponding with a schoolmate, at my urging,” Covelli answered. “The schoolmate was one of those driven from young Mr. Potter’s residence, apparently.”

“I have already registered my strong opposition with Albus,” McGonagall said. “I’m not sure what else you want –”

“Hermione has had something of a breakthrough, and it concerns Harry Potter. It should concern Dumbledore greatly. I need you to summon him here, immediately,” Covelli demanded.

McGonagall pursed her lips. “I will pass that information along to him.”

Covelli shook her head. “No, he will come immediately. Tell him that I wish to know why Hermione Granger would sense that Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort project identical magical auras. That should capture his attention.”

McGonagall stared at her in horror. “Did she say that? She didn’t say ‘similar’, did she? Identical?” When Covelli nodded, she went on, “Dear Lord above... there has always been an obvious connection between the two, but this is entirely... I will inform him immediately. I expect that you will see him within the hour, barring a serious complication.” She collapsed the silent space and dashed back down the corridor twice as fast as she had come.

It was clear to Covelli that the interruption hadn’t calmed Hermione; if anything, she had a look on her face that suggested she now owned her anger. “So Dumbledore’s going to come and make it all better, is that it?” the girl snapped. “I can’t believe you sent for him without asking me!”

Covelli calmly offered, “Your Headmaster is in the best position to aid you in finding the answers you seek. I assume that you still intend to return to Hogwarts?”

Hermione averted her eyes. “Yes... of course...”

“Very well... then it is time to resolve your issues with him now –” Covelli began.

Hermione cut her off with a laugh. “That’s fine advice, coming from you,” she mocked.

Covelli’s reserve boiled away, and she advanced on the girl. “I allowed Albus Dumbledore to shape my life, even as I thought I was taking control by leaving. It took me twenty years to understand that. Would you like to make the same mistake? Is that what you want? If it is, then you may as well start running now!” The girl flinched, and Covelli squeezed her eyes shut; “That was brilliant,” she added under her breath.

Hermione crossed her arms, and rocked back and forth ever so slightly. “He plays with people like they were chess pieces,” she said in a near whisper.

“He does,” Covelli agreed, “and then he hopes for the best. Sometimes, I wonder if it’s the only kind of leadership that wizards understand.” They stood in silence for a time, Hermione gently rocking and Covelli hoping that she hadn’t managed to tear asunder the girl’s progress over an embarrassing lapse of self control.

“Thank you,” Hermione said softly.

“For what?” Covelli asked.

“For being honest,” Hermione answered, “even if you treat me as a child now and again.”

Covelli heard an unaccustomed sound in the corridor. “He is here,” she said, and made to leave.

“What? You’re... you’re not staying?” Hermione asked, eyes suddenly wide.

"I will be just outside," Covelli assured her. "If you require anything, you will walk through that door. Dumbledore has no rights in this house that I do not assign him."

Dumbledore paused at the threshold. He was in full wizarding regalia, and Hermione withered. Before Covelli could speak, Dumbledore's face fell; he doffed his hat, waved his hands, and took on an appearance that would have easily blended with the beachcombers far below the villa.

Dumbledore took two steps into the room, almost hesitantly. Covelli paused beside him. "This is your opportunity for atonement. Don't squander it," she said, surely loud enough that Hermione could hear. "The door shall be open, and there will be no silencing charms." Dumbledore silently nodded. Covelli turned and looked to Hermione; she tried to pour all of her hopes into one glance before she turned away and walked into the corridor.

* * * * *

Hermione found herself backing away as Dumbledore crossed the room, and had to will her feet to stop moving. All the control and the poise she had recovered over several days felt as though it was being drawn out of her. Dr. Covelli said he has no rights here, she thought frantically. This isn't the Headmaster's Office... I'm in control here. The Headmaster stopped abruptly. He looked very tired, almost sad in a way. Part of her was inclined to offer comfort of some sort, and part of her burned at the sight of him. She settled for fixing him in a defiant glare.

He stopped before Covelli's framed diplomas, and let his fingers trace across the frames. "Laurea in Medicina e Chirurgia... goodness..." he murmured.

The words poured from Hermione's mouth before she could think them through, which made her even more uncomfortable. "I suppose that you think she's a failure, don't you?" she accused.

Dumbledore turned slowly, his eyebrows raised high. "A failure? Why ever would I think that?"

Again, Hermione responded from somewhere immediate, somewhere more powerful than she thought she was. "She was your apprentice, after all. Muggle schooling, a Muggle life... it's a slap in the face, isn't it? Almost a betrayal?"

Dumbledore walked heavily across the room. He did not seat himself behind Covelli's desk, as Hermione had anticipated; instead he took one of the chairs that sat before the desk. He settled into the chair completely, before he replied, "It is only a betrayal if she has betrayed herself. Dr. Covelli's accomplishments are extraordinary by any measure."

"She hates you," Hermione blurted out.

Dumbledore steepled his hands before his face, and leant forward in his chair. "She does not trust me, she does not respect me, and it is even possible that she wishes me ill. I do not believe that she truly hates me."

"Why?" demanded Hermione.

Dumbledore gestured at the room, ending with the diplomas. "Look at what she has accomplished. This is not a life borne of hate – anger and sadness, to be sure, but not hate." He brought his hands back together, and looked intently at Hermione. "Do you hate me, Miss Granger?"

Hermione flushed and refused to meet his eyes, taken aback for a moment and a little ashamed by the question. "No, sir..."

Dumbledore's voice lightened. "I am very pleased to hear that."

I'm in control here, Hermione berated herself, this is my room. She set her jaw and dared his gaze. Her voice was as cold as she could make it. "I hate Voldemort. I think... I'm terribly angry with you... terribly disappointed." Dumbledore shifted uncomfortably in his seat at the last, and Hermione was very surprised by the pleasure she took in that.

“I have earned your disappointment,” he said. “What does it mean for you to hate, I wonder?”

She sat on the edge of the desk – which left her looking down at the Headmaster – and thought for only a moment before she let forth. “It means that I want to kill him. Since that is impossible, I shall do everything in my power to make sure that Harry succeeds. Killing’s too good for him, really. I want him to suffer. I want him to beg for mercy, and I want to be the one to deny him. Are you satisfied?”

His face was impassive, as it usually was, but she just knew that it was by sheer force of will. “What Voldemort did to you was unspeakable, truly... but... Miss Granger, you must not give into hate, you must not. I have had this conversation before, with two women as impressive as yourself. One chose the light, and one chose a darker path. You have met one, and I dearly wish that you could meet the other.”

“Stop, Headmaster... please stop,” she said firmly. “With all due respect, this isn’t about platitudes or taking away your guilt. This is about the fact that I am angry with you, angrier all the time in fact. We will be talking about that, and I will ask you to stop evading me. Honestly, it’s insulting.”

“I apologise... but choosing the path of light is much more than a matter of platitude,” he said slowly.

“Do I strike you as a person who wants to root around in the Dark Arts, Headmaster?” Hermione snapped. “I loathe the idea, but I will do what has to be done. By the way, I don’t want you to think that I intend to avoid your observations. Dr. Covelli doesn’t strike me as having gone down a dark path, and I fear that I’ll end up meeting Harry’s mum sooner than I’d like, if I continue to accept your direction.” Dumbledore’s mouth fell open slightly, and Hermione saw his eyes flash for just a moment. Five points to me, she thought confidently.

“Clearly, regarding you as merely a student wastes both your time and mine,” Dumbledore said.

Hermione's eyes narrowed; she recalled this specific approach quite clearly from their meeting at Grimmauld Place, and wasn't about to accept it again. "Don't flatter me, sir, because I'm not in a mood to accept it warmly," she warned. "The difference in our status couldn't be greater. I don't expect you to regard me as a peer. I do appreciate any efforts on your part to avoid insulting my intelligence... sir."

Dumbledore laughed, which was something that she absolutely didn't expect; it was quite startling, and she immediately wondered if that was his intent. "This... oh, dear... this isn't going well at all, is it?" he managed.

"No," she said flatly, "it isn't."

Dumbledore let himself settle again, and then advanced, "Perhaps we should press to our objectives, Miss Granger. You have made your anger clear, and I presume that you seek some answers on that front? Perhaps you seek assurances of a kind? I, of course, have come because of your disconcerting observation about Harry –"

"I didn't intend to convey that to you, Headmaster," Hermione fumed. "Dr. Covelli took that on herself."

"Is that so? That is... most unexpected, indeed." Dumbledore stroked his beard very slowly – very deliberately, Hermione thought. "Very well... I await your anger, and I have no intention of doing or saying anything to disarm you. I am no doubt deserving of your remarks to come."

Hermione's mouth nearly opened before she regained control. Clever, she thought, leaving your own concerns to sit there like the dragon in the room. Fair enough, I'll leave them sit. She pushed thoughts of Harry aside, and went straight to her first point. "Did you remove the binding curse? Did you really remove it?" she asked pointedly.

Dumbledore opened his hands, almost defensively. "You were present, Miss Granger. You are more than sufficiently intelligent and well-trained to know what Professor Flitwick and myself were –"

“And already, you’re being disarming,” Hermione snapped. “Please answer the question, sir.”

“We removed the safeguarding spell to the best of our training and ability,” Dumbledore said.

Hermione held up her left hand, and waved the back of it at him. “It was a curse... a curse, Headmaster!” she shouted. “If you removed it, then I want you to explain where these came from!” Anger welled up in her stomach, and her raised hand shook. This is my room, she told herself anxiously, I’m in control here, not him!

Dumbledore reached for her hand, and then stopped himself. “May I?” he asked. She nodded, and her hand continued to tremble in his grasp. Dumbledore slowly withdrew his wand and gave it a complex wave that seemed to cast her hand in blue light. The faint runes that she had found there now stood in sharp relief.

“Of course...” Dumbledore murmured. “Miss Granger, I must yet again apologise. I was made aware of the possibility that this might have occurred, shortly before your episode at the Lovegood residence. A related phenomenon has affected Harry. I had intended to consult with Professor Flitwick on the matter, but to be perfectly honest... in the crush of events these past weeks... I simply neglected to do so.”

Hermione’s jaw tightened. “To the best of your ability, indeed!” she glowered.

Dumbledore looked at her strangely for a moment. “Oh! No, no, these are not residual from the removal... no, certainly not. In actuality, I believe that Harry is the responsible party. I absolutely must contact Filius to confirm this, as soon as possible.”

Hermione looked to Dumbledore, then to her hand, and then to the Headmaster’s face again. “Harry? But... I don’t... how?”

“Miss Granger, which three runes were placed upon both your hand and Harry’s in order to anchor the binding?” Dumbledore asked.

Hermione balked but another part of her took over, the part that would like nothing better than to set up housekeeping amongst a mountain of books. She was almost grateful. “The binding curse employed uruz, perþ, and inguz – uruz to strengthen will, perþ to secure the secret, and inguz to ground the mind,” she recited.

Dumbledore smiled – too broadly, Hermione was certain, almost Cheshire-like. “Excellent. Look upon these runes, Miss Granger, and interpret them for me if you would?”

Hermione looked at the runes, in the careful way that she looked down from great heights. She read them, blood rushed to her cheeks, and she read them again, then stammered, “They’re... not the same... they’ve changed... how could I...?” How could I have been so stupid? she cursed herself. A first-year has the good sense to look before leaping!

“Yes, Harry was equally baffled,” Dumbledore recounted. “In addition, he has not studied Ancient Runes; thus, I had to interpret the signs for him. I realise that it is technically a seventh-year expectation, but I am certain that you can make a three-aett interpretation without my assistance.”

Hermione pulled her hand free, and slumped into the empty chair that faced Dumbledore. She brushed the fingertips of her right hand over the runes. They weren’t raised – they were barely visible outside Dumbledore’s wash of blue light – but she was certain that she could feel them; they gave off a slight tingle. “I feel very foolish right now,” she said hoarsely.

“This is hardly a circumstance to be anticipated, Miss Granger,” Dumbledore assured her. “When unbound by expectations, Harry’s power seems to work in very powerful and most remarkable ways, does it not?” He wiggled his fingers, and the blue light caught her hand again. “Interpret the runes, if you would?”

She stifled a sob, as her error sunk in and thoughts of Worthington Day School and her failure at the Department of Mysteries raced through her head. I will not be like this! she berated herself, and then forced herself to look at the runes. “The runes are... raiðo, sowulo

and laguz," she choked out. "The combination still takes in all three aetts... should I... should I read this as a bind-rune or as a rune row, sir?"

"The original binding relied upon a rune row," the Headmaster replied with another Cheshire smile that shook Hermione back to her senses. She didn't like the thought that he was setting her up again, but either she would read the runes or call for Dr. Covelli to somehow fix everything, and the reading was the right choice.

"Raiðo... is about the threads of a person's life and how those threads intersect with other threads, other lives, or other fates. It's about seeing and acting on the critical moments –" Hermione stopped abruptly.

Dumbledore leant forward in his chair; he appeared very interested in what she had to say. "Yes?"

"Nothing, sir... it's about acting on the critical moments in one's life... the ones that... that determine our future path," she finished, and wondered what Harry had been thinking about to impart that particular rune.

"Go on, please," Dumbledore urged her.

"Sowulo is... more straightforward. This rune reflects healing, and positive conclusions. It represents success on a journey..." She trailed off this time.

"Does this bring something to mind?" asked Dumbledore.

"He knows... Ginny or Luna must have said something," Hermione said. "I should have sent him word. It wasn't right..."

"I informed Harry, in truth. Why did you wish to keep your pain from him? Did you feel that your pain was somehow less important than his?" Dumbledore wondered.

The anger welled up inside her again. "It is, isn't it? Tell me you don't believe it's so," she snapped. "Just... let me finish this please." She

stared at the third rune. “It’s laguz... this is for confronting fears... understanding them, so... so we can use what we learn to help another...”

“Miss Granger...” Dumbledore began.

Everything felt as though it was spiralling out of her control. “How did he do this? How could he have known...?” she whispered, because she was afraid that her voice would crack before the Headmaster, and she wouldn’t allow that – couldn’t allow that. Something else occurred to her; she cleared her throat, and asked, “Did Harry’s runes change, as well?”

Dumbledore stroked his beard. “Yes, they did. Harry now possesses gebo, the gift; naubiz, the need; and eihwaz, the sign of change.” He leant forward, and rubbed his hands together. “What do you see amidst the signs? What do you believe, Miss Granger?” Dumbledore asked her gently.

“He doesn’t believe that I failed him,” she said nervously. When the Headmaster said nothing in return for what seemed like a very long time, she added, “He’s wrong.”

“I imagine that Harry feels he has failed you, by allowing you to be injured twice in as many months,” Dumbledore offered gently. “Both of you are in error, of course. You have not failed him through your actions. He cannot guarantee your safety. Such are the painful truths of war.”

Hermione’s voice quavered. “He should have let me go,” she insisted.

“Nothing could have made him do so,” Dumbledore said. “Harry was faced with a situation where every option appeared wanting. He made a choice – a shocking and fascinating choice – and the result was as favourable as possible under the circumstances.”

“What did it cost him, Headmaster?” Hermione cried. “Do you have any idea?”

“I cannot answer that with any precision,” Dumbledore returned. “I can easily surmise the cost to him had he not acted. Harry killed seven people that day, Miss Granger, and that is not something to be taken lightly. However, he did so to save at least a dozen lives directly and doubtless saved even more lives indirectly. If he had sat there and done nothing, not only would you be dead, but the entire Weasley family save Charles and Percival... Miss Tonks... Miss Jones... your parents as well, Miss Granger...” He reached out and rested his hands atop hers. “Do you honestly believe that he should have let you go?”

Hermione’s chest heaved, and she felt wetness rush down her cheeks. She loathed herself for being weak. “He... he should have gone straight for Voldemort,” she choked out.

“No,” Dumbledore said firmly. “He was not prepared, and he would have failed. I find no fault with his course of action in this matter, Miss Granger, none at all.”

“Why did you leave him, then?” she blurted out.

He slowly pulled his hands away. “I’m sorry?”

She wiped at her eyes with the backs of her hands. “I asked, why did you leave him? He’s alone. If he’s not prepared to face Voldemort, how can you possibly leave him alone?”

Dumbledore proffered a handkerchief withdrawn from a pocket in his trousers. “Harry is reasonably safe. In addition to his personal defensive capabilities and the protections and wards associated with his inheritance, I assure you that I have maintained a security perimeter. He has shown no recent interest in leaving the grounds of the property where he currently resides, thankfully. Thus... we wait.”

Hermione dabbed the handkerchief against her cheeks, then clutched it tightly. “I still don’t understand... why?”

“Harry chose to dismiss everyone from his presence,” Dumbledore explained. “This included those who were assigned to watch over him. As a result, I visited to confirm his wishes. Harry is a legal adult, Miss

Granger; I can no longer insist upon anything with regard to his care. After allowing him to rage at me for some time, I determined that it would be best to leave him entirely on his own for the time being. Having made certain that he understood this, I asked everyone to comply with his wishes, including all those with whom you are familiar. I hope that some time alone will allow Harry to come to realisations regarding his immediate future."

Hermione laughed nervously. "Oh, I imagine it will..."

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow. "Do you care to share your opinion with regard to my course of action?"

"Er... I'd prefer to keep it to myself, sir..." Hermione tried to stop her strained laughter, but she couldn't manage it.

Dumbledore's lips thinned; Hermione thought it looked like a parody of Professor McGonagall. "Miss Granger..."

She said hesitantly, "Headmaster... it's just that... well, only a boy could have possibly come up with that solution," Summoning her best imitation of Ron, she added, " 'If he doesn't like it, then I'll take my chess set and go home. He'll beg me back eventually!' Honestly, sir!"

Dumbledore sat very still for a few moments, and then began to laugh. "To think you were the one concerned about being disarmed! I appear to be at a serious disadvantage in this exchange!"

Hermione watched the Headmaster shrewdly, and then simply asked the questions foremost on her mind. "Why are you handling me so gently, sir? Do you fear that I'll break?"

"I do not know what to expect from you, Miss Granger," Dumbledore admitted. "You seem remarkably fit despite all that has happened. However, I have also seen the damage you have wrought upon two different rooms, and to be frank, there is something less than fit about the look in your eyes. I have already hurt you, and I do not wish to cause you further pain or injury. Would you prefer that I behave differently?"

“No, sir... thank you for your consideration,” Hermione said quietly.

“You do not trust me, of course,” Dumbledore said. “As I speak, you search for meanings and agendas.”

Hermione nodded reluctantly. “I still believe that you mean well, sir,” she offered.

“What can I offer you, to further demonstrate my intentions?” Dumbledore wondered aloud. “Surely you seek answers about the connection between Voldemort and Harry? Perhaps I can help you to find what you seek?”

Hermione frowned. “How does that lead me to stop searching for agendas, Headmaster? You certainly have something to gain by helping me.”

“Harry has something to gain, and I hold a considerable interest in Harry’s well being,” he corrected her. “Professor McGonagall made mention of identical magical auras...?”

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “Those weren’t my words,” she stated flatly.

Dumbledore sat straight in his chair, and intoned deeply, “Miss Granger, I must know of anything that impacts upon Harry’s safety –”

“So that you can own the information, and keep it from him if you can!” Hermione finished for him.

“I will no longer withhold anything that Harry needs to know, I promise you – just as I have promised him,” Dumbledore assured her.

“And yet, you will be the one who decides what Harry needs to know,” Hermione fired back.

“Perhaps you believe that you should take on this role? You have served as surrogate decision maker for Harry on many occasions during your friendship, have you not?” Dumbledore pointed out.

Hermione stiffened. "I've encouraged Harry to make certain decisions, but he's done so with all the information at hand," she insisted. "You've tossed him toast scraps like you're feeding a pigeon on the walk. For the life of me, I can scarcely see how Harry is supposed to function in the wizarding world after he..." She stopped, and her eyes widened in horror. "No... you... you couldn't... you wouldn't!"

"What is it that I would or wouldn't do?" Dumbledore asked.

Hermione stood up abruptly, and her hands moved quickly to her hips. "Harry's not supposed to worry about life afterward, is he?" she accused. .

Dumbledore attempted to head her off. "Miss Granger, you surely can't be implying...?"

She wouldn't be denied. "It's no better than murder! How could you do this to him? HOW?" She pounded at his chest in such frenzy that she didn't see Covelli enter the room, barely noticed hands holding her wrists, barely heard the voice telling her to take slow breaths, barely felt the chair beneath her. All she could think was how horrible, how inhuman Dumbledore was – how there was so little difference between Dumbledore and Voldemort, between Voldemort and Harry, between her and Harry, between all of them. After a while, it registered that she was seated and Dumbledore was kneeling before her.

"Miss Granger... can you hear me? I want you to listen to me. I need you to listen to me now," he said.

"I hear you," she said weakly. She saw Covelli from the corner of her eye, and felt a rush of shame over her lack of self-control.

"Miss Granger... I have cared for Harry more than for myself for many years. I have made many decisions that I would reconsider had I to make them a second time. I am not certain that I would have left Harry with the Dursleys at all, and particularly after he began his attendance at Hogwarts. I am not certain whether I would have waited as long as I did to share with him the prophecy that so affects his fate, though I do not know at what point it might have been

appropriate to share. I have tried to let Harry live normally, to the greatest extent possible, though this was forced at times and absurd at other times. I have tried very hard to let Harry live outside of a cage this summer, and only seem to have made things worse between us. Harry is not a weapon, though he may wield one someday on behalf of us all. He is not a pawn, nor a chess piece of any kind.” Dumbledore looked deeply into Hermione’s eyes. His eyes were impossibly blue, she thought, and somehow she could see the truth of what he was saying. It wasn’t Legilimency, or at least she didn’t think it was; she had no sense of anyone inside her head other than herself.

“I have no children,” he went on, “and of my family, only my brother remains. I have felt a special kinship, a bond if you like, with certain of my students along the way. I felt this to a degree with Harry’s father, particularly after the death of his parents. I felt it to a degree with Sirius Black, which made the sting of his apparent betrayal all the more sharp. I share that bond with Professor Hagrid, as you may have surmised... but above all others –”

“I’m so sorry,” Hermione whispered. She tried to look away from the Headmaster, but he wouldn’t allow it.

“Do not be ashamed,” he said. “I am the one who has failed you, Miss Granger. I have failed Harry as well, but I believe that it is not too late to make amends. You must hear the rest of what I have to say.”

“Yes, sir...” she managed.

“I could not intentionally injure Harry. I have allowed him to take great risks, but only those I have believed him prepared to take on. The Department of Mysteries was not one of those occasions. So many mistakes were made...” He paused and looked away for a moment; she managed to take in a breath, before he returned his gaze. “When Tom was battling with me, he attempted to possess Harry. In the process, he became ensnared in Harry’s mind; he could not release himself. At that moment, I became certain that Harry will eventually defeat him. Harry was in exquisite pain, as was Tom... he dared me to kill Harry, Miss Granger. If I had done so, it is quite possible that both would have been destroyed. I have thought on this, and I believe

that the conditions of the prophecy would have been fulfilled had I taken action. Obviously, I did not do so. I never considered it. I would not consider it. I will not consider it. Do you understand?"

"You love Harry," Hermione said quietly.

"Yes, as surely as if he were my own grandson, once or twice removed," Dumbledore agreed. His eyes twinkled, and he added, "As surely as the Weasleys love him, and as surely as you love him."

"Yes," she whispered.

"Love is not just a matter of thought, but of deed. May I show you something?" Dumbledore asked.

"Of course, sir," Hermione answered.

He took his wand, and caused a spray of blue light to shine not on the three runes on her left hand, but instead on her other hand. A single whitish rune shone on her skin. "I don't understand," she said.

Dumbledore held up his free hand, and redirected the light. "It is gebo, as currently appears on Harry's hand, but I do not believe that Harry shared my precise intention."

Hermione's mind was numb; she was so flooded with competing emotions that she could scarcely think. It took her nearly a minute before realisation set in. "We think of gifts, but gebo... you made an oath, sir?"

"I made an oath," Dumbledore confirmed, "whilst you were caught in the Dreamweaver, that I shall not fail you again. I have never made such a sweeping oath in my life, Miss Granger; it was quite foolish on my part... the emotions of an old man run amok, perhaps."

"I'll release you, of course –" Hermione said immediately.

"In addition to instruction, you would require my consent," Dumbledore noted. "You do not have it, and shall not receive it, not yet... not until you are convinced, not until you recover your trust."

Hermione's mouth dropped open, despite herself. "I... don't know what to say, Headmaster..."

"Nor do I," Covelli murmured.

"I know a great deal about Voldemort's magical power, Miss Granger. I know of the rituals in which he was engaged, prior to his first defeat. Regrettably, I know as much about the nature of the Avada Kedavra curse as any living wizard," Dumbledore said. "I have known that Voldemort and Harry are connected since the night that Harry survived the curse. What Professor McGonagall conveyed to me casts that connection in a rather different light. Thusly, I offer you a proposition. We shall study the magical connection, together, beginning as soon as you are able. Dr. Covelli may participate in this endeavour, if you desire; I daresay, she would be of great help. If we should learn anything useful, then we will not keep it from Harry. You and I – or all three of us, if you wish it – shall decide how to convey the information. If nothing else, you should be quite well prepared for your N.E.W.T. theory examinations in Charms, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes and Defence Against the Dark Arts at the conclusion of our efforts." He went silent, still on his knees, waiting.

Hermione could find no other word other than awe to describe what she felt at that moment. "Dr. Covelli...?" Hermione began.

"I will do what you ask of me, Hermione," Covelli said tonelessly.

"Thank you, Doctor." Hermione turned back to Dumbledore, and told him, "I accept. I'd like to begin immediately."

"I believe..." Dumbledore stopped, and smiled awkwardly – it was almost a grimace. "I believe that this old man has spent far too long on his knees."

Hermione burst from the chair, and immediately took his arm. "I'm thoughtless, sir," she said quickly.

“I chose the position,” he laughed softly, as he slowly rose to his feet with her help. “We could begin tomorrow, if you wish, though all scheduling matters lie presently in the hands of Dr. Covelli.”

Covelli pursed her lips. “Hermione, I’d like you to rest for the remainder of the afternoon. No assignments, no textbooks – sit on the loggia, or put the pool to use. We... can speak more of this after the evening meal.”

“I hope you recognise, Miss Granger, that this exploration may take quite some time,” Dumbledore interjected. “We may be conducting research long after the school year resumes.” He gave Covelli a curious look that Hermione couldn’t interpret.

“Yes, sir, I understand. I’ll be patient,” Hermione said.

“I don’t expect you to remain patient, for that would doubtless be asking too much,” Dumbledore returned, “but I will insist upon a reasonable pace.”

Hermione blushed faintly. “Yes, sir.”

“Off with you!” Covelli urged, and directed her to the door.

Hermione decided that a few laps in the long narrow pool would be a wise course. She was stiff, the scar on her chest was tight, and she needed to clear her head before either of her parents found the chance to ask after her. She stopped after taking a few paces toward her room, set adrift by all the emotions and all the information. The thought of conducting research with two terribly brilliant people had energized her, but she knew that she was far from being herself again; under the excitement, cold empty feelings awaited the chance to overtake her.

Two things kept the darkness at bay. First, she was still shocked by the lengths to which the Headmaster had gone to secure her trust – an oath that even he admitted was foolishly broad, and sharing the depth of his feelings for Harry. Second, the Headmaster had passed up the opportunity to use Harry as a pure weapon against Voldemort; he could have destroyed one by killing the other, but refused. It took

her a few moments to understand why those pieces of information had given her hope. If there were truly any chance of Harry becoming evil, she realised – of him becoming like Voldemort – then Dumbledore wouldn't have hesitated to sacrifice him. If Harry was fated to become like Voldemort, Dumbledore couldn't possibly love him as a grandson of a sort – she was sure of it. She could take the connection between Harry and Voldemort and toss it in the bin with the other irrational fears she struggled against – it was still there, it would be there for some time perhaps, but it didn't have to own her nights. Now she could try to focus on finding answers, and then on making certain that Dumbledore didn't keep those answers from Harry.

She decided that it was time to send Harry a post or some sort of message; it was far overdue. As she resumed the walk to her room, she swore that she overheard Covelli say, "Albus... I don't know where to begin –", just before a strong squelch rattled the pictures on the walls of the corridor and left the entire area unnaturally silent.

Hermione tapped the end of the biro against the desk for a very long time before she realised that she was doing it. She resorted to clutching it, and continued to stare at the blank sheet of creamy paper before her. Dr. Covelli had very nice biros and even nicer paper, and Hermione had found that she missed the feel of a good biro; besides, you can't chew on the end of a quill – well, not effectively at any rate, she admitted to herself.

She didn't care for being easily distracted and disorganized in her thoughts, not at all, but after nearly a month she was resigned to reckoning with the problems for some time to come. "I don't like this," she grumbled aloud. "Think, Granger, just think... it's only a post, for goodness' sake."

Dear Harry,

She lifted the biro, and the dry end promptly slid between her teeth. Wrong, she thought, entirely wrong. Down went the biro again, and a line ran through the abortive greeting.

Dearest Harry,

Hermione shook her head. She couldn't write that; he might take it entirely wrong, for a start. A small smile played across her lips. "The look on his face would be priceless," she murmured as another line of ink sliced through words.

Harry,

It's rather hard to argue with that, she thought.

How are you? I am. . .

"...pathetic, that's how I am," she fumed, "so pathetic that I can't even write a bloody post!" The biro tore through the offending words, back and forth and back and forth, until it tore through the paper entirely.

A steaming cup of tea slid into view. "I'm sure it's not as bad as all that." The colour immediately gave away both the tea and its server – Earl Grey, with cream and sugar.

"Good afternoon, Mother," Hermione sighed.

Mrs. Granger managed a wan smile. "Each afternoon seems to be better than the previous one, doesn't it?"

"That isn't saying much," Hermione muttered.

"I wish you'd sit out on the loggia or the veranda, instead of confining yourself." Mrs. Granger grazed her fingertips along the ornate trim of one of the two reading tables in the villa's library, and opened the cover of an antique volume that lay there. "Don't misunderstand, Hermione, I am as acquainted with bibliophilia as you, but how often can one take advantage of such a climate as this?"

"I'd rather stay indoors," Hermione said. "I find it more comfortable here." She slipped open two books from the pile adjacent to the small stack of creamy paper, and made a show of taking a few notes.

"I can't think of a summer where you've completely avoided the opportunity to sun yourself," Mrs. Granger noted.

Hermione slapped down the biro in her hand hard against the desk. "Well, this hasn't been like previous summers, has it?"

Mrs. Granger took a slight step back – showed a slight crack in her control, as Hermione was quick to notice – but nonetheless said firmly, "Hermione, please mind your tone with me."

"Afraid I'm going to explode, Mother?" Hermione asked in a way that was clearly not mindful of tone, and then added dismissively, "Some of the books in this room are nearly a thousand years old; I'd never risk them."

"A thousand years old," Mrs. Granger whispered. She reverently turned the first page of the volume before her. "Remarkable... I don't know that I could ever become accustomed to the world as they see it... the way you see it now. I imagine I'd be overcome every time I set foot in the library at that school of yours."

"I'm still in awe of the entire place, actually," Hermione admitted, "but there's seldom time to allow it."

"May I sit?" Mrs. Granger asked.

"Of course," Hermione answered quickly. After a moment's pause, she added, "I didn't expect you to be going on about the books and the library, you know."

Mrs. Granger nearly smirked. "I still have the ability to surprise you?" She settled into an intricately carved wooden chair opposite Hermione, and took a sip at her own cup of tea. "What was I supposed to be going on about, then?"

Hermione kept her eyes focused on the open books, and kept jotting faux notes. She knew that she couldn't meet her mother's eyes and maintain control, and she was determined to control herself, to comport herself as she should. "I expected that you'd speak to me

about being catty, just now. I expected to be reminded of my place, perhaps. I... expected you to say something about my hair."

"It was startling at first sight," Mrs. Granger allowed. "Honestly, I was surprised that you changed it to a style so similar to mine."

"Not everything is about you, Mother," Hermione snapped, and immediately regretted it.

Mrs. Granger stiffened. "I was making an observation; I meant nothing by it," she said crisply. "As for the rest... I'm prepared to allow quite a lot, considering what you've been through."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said. She ran her free hand through the thick short hair that draped around the back of her neck. "I know Dad liked it as it was, but you know I've never cared for my hair. It was a nightmare to manage, wearing it long like that. Besides, it was a liability –the Department of Mysteries and the attack at the house taught me that. I can't be brushing hair from my face the next time that—" She was cut off by the sound of her mother's teacup shattering against the floor.

"Oh... goodness... dropped my... how clumsy of me..." Mrs. Granger babbled.

Hermione quickly made for the broken bits of china. "Here, let me," she insisted. "It's my fault."

"Next time, you said... next time... in my head, I know that it can happen again... but in my heart... Hermione... no..." Mrs. Granger said in a voice that started hollow and simply died.

Hermione's throat tightened. She brushed china shards onto a sheet of the creamy paper. Her fingertips left tracings of spilled tea as a watermark; the leavings were brownish like drying blood. "This is why I always kept it separate from home, from you and Dad. I wasn't trying to hurt you; I never wanted you to be hurt," she said.

"That's my responsibility, not yours!" Mrs. Granger cried. She clasped her hands together tightly, yet they still shook. "I'm to keep you from

being hurt, and I can't! There's not... there's not one bloody damned thing your father and I can do! We just sat there... we just... at least Thomas talked back to them... I just sat there and watched them k-killing you!"

The remnants of the teacup fell back to the floor as Hermione found herself wrested into a hug by trembling hands. Her mother shuddered and began to sob openly. "Mother... Mum... I know it was awful... but I'm all right now," she said awkwardly; her mind reeled from hearing 'bloody damned thing' come out of her mother's mouth.

Mrs. Granger's laugh was uncomfortably edgy. "You're not all right, Hermione! How could you be? Your father's not all right, I'm not all right... you don't understand... how can I make you understand?"

Hermione's shirt collar was damp from where her mother's face was crushed against it. Her heart was pounding, and she was determined for some reason or another that she wouldn't cry. "I'm so sorry for all of this! The house, it's never going to be the same now... the practice! Oh, Mum! I know you made some plans, but it must be ruined after all this time –"

Mrs. Granger squeezed even more tightly. "None of that matters! Do you honestly think either of us cares a whit? The house can be sold; the practice is in good hands. We'd walk away from all of it – from everything – just to make you safe. Don't you understand that?"

"Mum, I couldn't ask that of you," Hermione protested.

"You don't have to ask! You're our only daughter!" Mrs. Granger pulled back far enough to look Hermione in the eyes. "I've never said this before... Thomas and I agreed that we wouldn't... we wouldn't have boarded you, Hermione. We only did it because it was clear that you needed the sort of training that your school is suited to provide. We wouldn't have sent you away."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "But... but... you and Dad, you both boarded. You were Head Girl in your year; Dad was the cricket captain at his school, right? It always seemed like the both of you wanted the same for me... didn't you?"

Mrs. Granger let go of Hermione – reluctantly, it seemed – and rummaged through her purse for a handkerchief. “Once it was done, it was only proper to be encouraging. If we’d acted as though the whole thing was under duress, how would you have responded?”

Hermione sighed knowingly. “I’d have hated every second of it.” She waited until her mother dabbed at her eyes and her nose, and then extended her arms. For the first time in a very long time, it felt absolutely right to hug her mother – her Mum. “If I’d had any idea at all, I’d have never shortcut our holidays – I swear it.”

Mrs. Granger sniffed again, and let out a teary chuckle. “Yes, you would have. You’ve made friends – good friends, close friends. That’s the one thoroughly positive outcome of the past five years. To know that you had friends, that there were people who held you in high regard... it was such a relief.”

“I’ve wanted to share everything, honestly, but it always seemed right to hold back.” Hermione rubbed the back of her hand against her eyes. “I stopped holding back. Look what’s come of it.”

“We know who you are now, who you’ve become. Whatever else has happened, whatever else we may think, both your father and I are grateful for that.” Mrs. Granger looked fiercely at Hermione. “We will go anywhere – do anything – to keep you in our lives. We can’t lose you... do you understand? Please don’t let that happen, Hermione... please don’t walk away from us...”

Hermione pulled back with a start. “Walk away? Mum, I’d never do that! Even if... even if you need to go away for a while, you know, to be safe... walk away?” Her brows furrowed. “Why would you think that? Was something said?”

“Molly Weasley... took it upon herself...” Mrs. Granger started, and then stopped as her mouth set into a brittle line.

“Mrs. Weasley?” Hermione’s face slowly fell into her hands. “What did she say?”

“She seemed to feel that someone should inform us of the way of things for magical sorts born of boring, ordinary people like your father and I,” Mrs. Granger said icily. “She thought it especially important given that you will be coming of age in September. When did you intend to share that bit of news, by the way?”

Hermione’s cheeks heated. “The materials from Hogwarts mentioned that witches and wizards come of age at seventeen.”

“It wasn’t precisely top-of-mind five years ago,” Mrs. Granger snapped.

“Honestly, it’s not all that important,” Hermione insisted. “I’ve two more years at school; I suppose the greatest benefit will be an apparition license.” Her expression darkened. “Now, I’d like to know what Mrs. Weasley said. Yes, I’d very much like to know ‘the way of things’.”

“It wasn’t so much what she said... well, it was that as well... but it was the way she said it,” Mrs. Granger fumed. “I couldn’t possibly be expected to understand what was happening in your life, as I’m only a Muggle. Of course, she hastened to point out that your father and I are the very best sort of insignificant people!”

Hermione winced. “I can hear it, actually. ‘Oh, you poor dear’, more or less?” Her mother’s eyes narrowed and she had her answer. “Mrs. Weasley does that to everyone. Now... I’d really like to know what was said.”

“She thought it was only right that we know... she said you would inevitably start to withdraw from us,” Mrs. Granger said hesitantly. “She said that as you take on adult responsibilities, it will be harder for you to stand between two worlds. She said... Hermione, do these people actually marry at seventeen or eighteen years of age?”

Hermione’s eyes nearly bugged out of her head. “Marry? What on Earth was she talking about? I’m not... I mean someday, I suppose, but I can’t imagine what... bloody hell, has she gone mad?”

Mrs. Granger's eyebrows shot up. "Hermione!"

"Really, Mum, what am I supposed to say?" Hermione huffed. "Some of the old families still engage in arranged marriages, Mum. I should think it's obvious that the wizarding culture is... anachronistic, in some ways."

"She made it sound as though you're likely to receive proposals as soon as you come of age," Mrs. Granger said in a strangled voice. "She said —"

Hermione cut her off. "Receive what? I... I can tell you this much – if this is the 'way of things', no one's bothered to inform me!"

Mrs. Granger closed her eyes tightly. "I want to get this straight... it was so upsetting that I had difficulty taking it in... she said that you would be a very appealing prospect for a number of established families who didn't have backward ideas about blood and so forth. I told her that you'd surely care much more about your career than anything of that sort, and she said..." Her voice tightened again. "...she said that because you're our child, because you have the wrong sort of blood, your career options would be closely tied to... you know! For God's sake, Hermione, tell me it isn't like that! We didn't raise you to be beholden, to be treated like you're steerage-class... like a servant!"

Hermione choked back anger, and tried as best she could to think carefully. "I suppose it is true that purebloods dominate the leadership positions at the Ministry, and they certainly seem to hold sway over the economy... but I don't understand Mrs. Weasley's point. If there's no way to advance by merit, then she must be suggesting that... like hell!"

Mrs. Granger flushed brightly. "Hermione!"

"It won't be my lot in life to marry well in hopes that my children might receive better scraps from the table and my children's children might advance! I'll lead my life on my own terms, thank you very much! I'd... I'd snap my wand in two before it ever came to that!" Hermione roared. "The Weasleys haven't been like this, not at all! Mrs. Weasley

knows me... how could she possibly think I would...?" Her jaw slowly dropped. "Oh, no... but Ron isn't of age until next March. She can't possibly think that George, or... or Fred, for pity's sake? Percy?" She started to laugh hysterically. "That would be cracking! Hermione Granger brings the Weasleys back together by m-marrying the wayward brother! The woman's barmy, Mum – absolutely barmy!"

Mrs. Granger sat back as far as she could in her chair. "Hermione! Look... I'm happy to know that you don't believe what she told me – deliriously happy, in fact – but I don't think she was referring to any of her sons, and I don't want to put a wedge between you and your friends over this. I know precisely where to direct my anger."

Hermione quickly stopped laughing. "Don't believe a word of it, Mum, not a word! If Ron or Ginny tried to feed me a line like this, I'd tell them to get stuffed. Honestly, the woman's delusional if she believes I'd ever marry anyone who would pull me away from Dad or from you."

"She... mentioned children as the breaking point, actually," Mrs. Granger said seriously.

Hermione pursed her lips. "Accidental magic, I expect. I can't imagine it would be any worse than it was for me as a child, and we managed. We'd work through it, I promise. After all, you and Dad aren't afraid of what I am..." All the breath rushed out of her, and she managed to add, "You aren't... are you?"

Mrs. Granger took a long time to answer, far too long for Hermione's comfort. "Some of what we've seen is wonderful – amazing, really – but some of it has been terribly frightening. Your father and I are afraid for you, Hermione. Please know that we're not afraid of you. We could never be afraid of you."

Hermione brushed at her damp cheeks. "Thank you, Mum," she whispered. She knelt there for a while, her head in her mother's lap, and let her hair be stroked. She let herself be ten years old again, before she knew that magic was real and when it still seemed as if her mum and dad could wave their hands and make everything bad go away.

“Letting you go is so difficult,” Mrs. Granger said quietly. “It’ll come a bit easier, knowing that you want to come back from time to time.”

Hermione nodded fiercely without raising her head. “I do, Mum, I do... but...” She felt her mother’s legs stiffen at the word, but pressed on. “...I need you and Dad to be safe until this is over. I can’t protect you, and you can’t be with me, not now. We have to talk this through, Mum – tonight, with Professor Dumbledore.”

“We’ll talk about it,” Mrs. Granger said with obvious reluctance.

Hermione dragged herself to her feet. “I have two posts to write... I hope you don’t mind.”

Mrs. Granger slowly stood. She tugged and brushed at her clothing to tease out the wrinkles. “One is the post you were failing to write as I came in – that would be to Harry, I assume?”

Hermione groaned. “It’s my own fault. If I hadn’t insisted on keeping everything from him...”

“And the other?” Mrs. Granger asked.

“Oh, just catching up with the Weasleys,” Hermione said nonchalantly.

Mrs. Granger raised an eyebrow. “I see. I’d like to see that one before it’s sent, if you don’t mind?” she said archly. “We mustn’t make this more than it is, however tempting that might be.”

“Yes, Mother,” Hermione sighed.

Harry,

I hope this post finds you well. While I know a little of your goings-on this month, I imagine we’ll have quite a lot to talk about. Your new home must be fascinating. I hope it doesn’t raise too many uncomfortable thoughts or memories.

As you've surely been told by now, I had a serious lapse of control not long after you left the Lovegoods' flat. My decision to keep this from you is one of the worst decisions I've ever made, Harry; I'm glad that Professor Dumbledore decided to provide you information. I berated you for hiding from us in July, and I've gone and done the same to you. I expect you to give me what-for when we see each other next, because I'm wholly deserving of it.

My time away has been very busy and very productive, though not so much in a bookish way. I've had a chance to get to know someone important to me in an unexpected way, and I've met someone who has helped me see some things about myself and about life that would have remained hidden or avoided all together. I've even mended fences with my Mum today.

Many things will be different now, I know, some visibly so and some below the surface. Someone told me that you may be taking an apprenticeship. If that's true, then I hope to be able to help you in some way. Helping you is very important to me; I doubt I could stop myself, in fact. This year, however, I look to you to set the boundaries for that help. If I've learned anything this summer, it's that this know-it-all doesn't know it all. Old habits die hard, of course. It's hard to admit to limits, even on paper.

The experience at my home left me with some uncomfortable realisations, Harry. Suppressing those realisations, even though I didn't know I was doing it, probably led to my loss of control. Some of this concerns you; I don't think it appropriate to say more in a post. Answers are required, for my own peace of mind at minimum. Professor Dumbledore and someone else who I dearly hope you meet someday have agreed to help me sort it all out. Because you're a part of this, I promise that you'll get the same answers that I do. It may not be very comfortable in the end, but I'm finished keeping things from you. I know that your situation is different from mine and I recognise that secrets will have to be kept. We must trust each other – I must trust that you won't keep secrets for petty reasons, and you must trust that I won't box you into choices any longer.

As I said, many things will be different. One thing that shall always remain the same is my abiding love and friendship for you, Harry.

With much love, from

Hermione

Hermione gave the post a final once-over, closed her eyes, and thrust the sheet into a parchment envelope. She had thought long and hard about whether to mention Professor Dumbledore and Dr. Covelli by name, in case the post was somehow intercepted, and ultimately decided to reference the doctor indirectly. The first several drafts had been more direct about what she had experienced; on reflection, that information had seemed too dangerous when put to paper.

She took a quill, dipped it in proper magical ink, and wrote Harry's name on the envelope. An address in Scotland appeared, but it flickered strangely. When she'd sent posts to Privet Drive, the address had simply failed to appear. The flickering stopped, and she put it out of her mind.

Covelli knocked on the open door of the library. "Good afternoon. I hope I'm not intruding?"

"This is your home – how could you intrude?" Hermione said lightly as she sealed the envelope with a wax seal.

Covelli remained in the doorway. "You have finished your post to Mr. Potter, I see?"

"At last," Hermione sighed with relief.

"I took tea with your mother and Minnie on the veranda," Covelli said casually.

Hermione carefully wiped down the quill. "Was it interesting?"

“Most interesting,” Covelli returned. “Your mother was very interested in discussing your most recent conversation. How do you feel about the outcome?”

“I feel lightened by ten stone,” Hermione said. “I called her Mum... it’s been a long time since I’ve done that.”

Covelli smiled broadly. “This may seem slightly out of sorts given our respective roles, but I am proud of you. Faced with two very difficult conversations today, you held your own.”

“Are you here to talk about Professor Dumbledore’s offer?” Hermione asked.

“I said that I would help you,” Covelli said. “Albus knew that I would have to come to England as a result. He was taking advantage to a degree, something in which he is well-schooled.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Hermione immediately insisted. “I’m very grateful for everything you’ve done, but it’s not –”

“I have my reasons for allowing myself to be manoeuvred,” Covelli assured her, “but I do appreciate your consideration.”

“So you’ll be returning with us?” Hermione confirmed.

“I must tend to some affairs, and then I’ll be along,” Covelli said. She entered the room, and peered at the writing desk. “Two envelopes? I didn’t realise you planned to send two posts, though I suppose it will require little extra effort from Mr. Moody.”

Hermione cleared her throat. “Yes... well... I needed to unburden myself.”

“I thought that was the purpose of your post to Mr. Potter,” Covelli said.

Hermione asked hesitantly, “I don’t know whether you can tell me, but... did my mum happen to mention someone called Molly Weasley?”

Covelli's eyes flashed. "Yes, she did – at great length."

"Then you surely understand," Hermione said.

"What is it that I should...?" Covelli stopped, and a smirk slowly spread across her face. "Oh, Hermione... 'unburden yourself', indeed!"

Hermione blushed and then threw caution to the wind. "I wonder... if a person were to inscribe the runes for, shall we say, amplification of a post...? If said person used magical ink on a parchment envelope, and if she were underage... would, er, certain authorities...?"

Covelli's smirk deepened. "Why, Miss Granger, I am surprised this has not been covered in your Charms lessons. Basic parchment charming is not restricted by age, to include the addressing charm and a variety of, ehh, enhancements?"

Hermione nearly toppled the ink in her haste. The proper runes were crystal clear in her mind. As she inscribed the third rune, the parchment began to redden.

"Were you aware that the addition of a fourth rune can cause the colour to revert to something more customary?" Covelli asked.

Hermione did nothing to suppress a wicked grin. "No, I wasn't aware of that," she said as though she didn't actually want to know. Covelli teased her for several minutes before she named the fourth rune.

* * * * *

August 24, 1996

Sneezing echoed down the corridor that led from the guest quarters to the veranda. Hermione stifled a giggle; each sneeze was like the firing of a cannon. With each blast, Mr. Granger looked up from the Times, Mrs. Granger said 'Oh, my' or 'Good heavens', and the corners of Dr. Covelli's mouth flickered.

Dumbledore at last followed his sneezes out of the corridor and to a seat at the sun-splashed table, his nose and mouth buried in a handkerchief. "I can't seem to rid myself of this sneezing," he said, his voice muffled by fabric.

"Are you well, Albus?" McGonagall asked.

Mr. Granger looked up yet again. "Watery eyes, eh? Prone to allergies, are you?"

Dumbledore blew his nose; the sound that resulted was like a poorly tuned trumpet. "Very few, thankfully," he said. "I break into hives at the sight of a crup, and certain potions cause me to sneeze. There are two sorts of flowers that come to mind, but I have seen no snapdragons... surely oleander can be found in Italy, but the flowers in my chamber were pink and not white."

McGonagall frowned. "Oleander comes in a pink variety. I'm certain I've seen it growing on this property."

Covelli appeared shocked. "Oh, poor Albus... Gina! Perche ha spostato il vaso nella camera degli ospiti piú piccola?"

The ancient domestica grunted loudly without looking up from the serving table. "Perche mi hai detto di spostarlo in là!" she snapped. Mrs. Granger let forth a snort that took Hermione by surprise.

"A fair warning, Doctor – despite my age and station, I am not above returning a prank," Dumbledore laughed.

"I mustn't present the impression that I've become dour," Covelli smirked. "Dourness is best left to your regular faculty." McGonagall let out an irritable huff at the last.

Mad-Eye Moody hobbled in from the courtyard. "Your posts are on their way, Granger," he said gruffly to Hermione. "Sent 'em by hired owl from... elsewhere."

"Hermione, I distinctly heard Mr. Moody say 'posts'," Mrs. Granger said. "I expected to review your post to Mrs. Weasley."

McGonagall arched an eyebrow at Hermione. "You sent a post to Mrs. Weasley, not to her children?"

Before Hermione could speak, Mrs. Granger replied, "It was regarding the matter discussed yesterday over tea."

McGonagall's voice tightened, which heightened her flinty burr. "What did the post say, Miss Granger?"

Hermione stiffened. "I informed Mrs. Weasley that I was unhappy with her statements to my mother, and that she should avoid making upsetting assertions in the future," she said coldly.

"This scone is magnificent. Gratzie, Gina," Dumbledore said. He took another bite, visibly savoured it, and added, "Am I to understand that Molly was being...?"

"Molly was being Molly?" McGonagall finished for him. "Indeed."

Dumbledore nodded knowingly. "I see. Did you address any misconceptions that may have resulted, Minerva?"

"Hermione managed that on her own," Covelli cut in. "This Weasley woman, she is frequently loose with her words, yes?"

"Mrs. Weasley feels that everyone is entitled to her opinion," Hermione said acidly, and drew a Cheshire smile from Dumbledore.

"I trust that the envelope was a neutral colour?" McGonagall said.

Moody's chuckle came out as a rattling rumble. "Looked almost exactly like the other post; nice bit of charming, that," he returned.

"Miss Granger! Where did you learn to mask a Howler?" McGonagall demanded.

"As for myself, I found the post thoroughly proportionate," Covelli said flatly.

McGonagall's eyes narrowed. "Luci... a word, please?" She gestured toward the entryway to the villa. Covelli shrugged, stood, and followed her inside.

Mrs. Granger scowled. "A 'Howler'? I expect an explanation – now, please."

"The Howling charm adds a magical exclamation point to a post, if you like," Dumbledore explained lightly. "In some circles, a Howler is frowned upon. For some families, the exchange of Howlers is almost sporting. I expect that the Weasleys tilt more to the latter, Mrs. Granger. A Howler will be unanticipated, but hardly unprecedented."

Mrs. Granger glared at Hermione. "I trust that you kept a copy of this post?"

"Let it go, Cordelia," Mr. Granger said without looking away from the Times. "If Hermione chose to stand up for us, then that's her business. She can and will fight her own battles, whether we like it or not."

Mrs. Granger paled. "You're... entitled to your opinion," she said quickly, and then burst from the table to dash inside the villa.

Before Hermione could rise to follow, Mr. Granger folded the paper and set it down. "We've seen the sort of battles that you fight, from far too close," he said. "She needs time to sort through this on her own; that's how she is. Of all people, Hermione, I should think you'd understand."

Dumbledore stroked his beard. "What do you require, Mr. Granger, if I may be so bold... time? Explanations or assurances, perhaps?"

Mr. Granger fixed Dumbledore with a powerful stare that Hermione had never before seen from her father; his voice was like ice. "We did not intend for our daughter to attend military school, Mr. Dumbledore. I require assurances that you can't provide. I'm led to understand that Hermione may make her own decision to return to Hogwarts in a month's time, so there's no point to standing in the way. Never mistake that for agreement, or comfort, or anything of the sort."

“Dad...” Hermione started.

“I’ve nothing more to say on the matter,” Mr. Granger growled. It was clear he would brook no opposition.

“Have you and Mrs. Granger had an opportunity to consider the issues that Miss Granger raised at table last evening?” Dumbledore asked.

Mr. Granger’s jaw was firmly set. “The decision regarding our residence will be made amongst our family, and only our family,” he answered. “You will be consulted if there’s something required of you.”

Dumbledore nodded, and began to rise from his chair. “Very well, sir. Miss Granger, I had thought that we might organise your research and revision plans today. However, I understand completely if you wish to defer...”

“Don’t do that on my part,” Mr. Granger said. “Hermione told us that you’d offered her special tuition. We know enough about your world to recognise that opportunity for what it is.” He stood, and motioned for Dumbledore to keep his seat. “Studying under you may enhance her chances for concluding this business alive and well, and there’s nothing more important to us. I trust I’ve made myself clear?”

Dumbledore’s face remained impassive, but Hermione thought something about him seemed to have sagged. “Abundantly clear, Mr. Granger,” he said.

Mr. Granger leant down and kissed Hermione on the cheek. “If you need anything, anything at all, I’m just inside,” he said.

“I love you too, Dad,” she said under her breath as he walked away.

“Your father responded to my offer when I was in fact addressing you, Miss Granger,” Dumbledore pointed out. “If you’d care to defer until another day, I would understand.”

"No, thank you," Hermione said. "Honestly, it doesn't feel like there are any days to spare."

"True enough," Dumbledore agreed, as he fished inside his shirt pocket. He withdrew an empty hand, and appeared to place a spot of nothing carefully atop the table. He waved his wand over the empty tabletop twice. "I took the liberty of returning to Hogwarts late in the evening and examining my personal library in brief." From a pocket in his trousers, he withdrew a small slip of parchment. "Would you be so kind as to read this, please?" She nodded.

There is a modest-sized trunk directly in front of you. Blink three times, and it will be revealed.

The parchment immediately crumbled to dust. Hermione looked curiously to Dumbledore, and then did as she read. When she opened her eyes the third time, a trunk sat between them atop the table. It was perhaps two-and-a-half feet across and heavily decorated in what she knew to be Ogham script.

"All of the materials from my library that relate to the events of October 31, 1981 are placed inside, so that you may conduct a thorough review. Others have trod this ground but I am hopeful that your perspective may lead to new insights. There are only three living people who can see this trunk, and all three are present on this property," Dumbledore explained. "I shall show you how you can enlarge and reduce the trunk by controlling its charms, as well as a few special features. I trust it is unnecessary for me to stress the importance of keeping this trunk and the materials contained therein under your control at all times?"

Hermione tried not to gulp like an awe-struck schoolgirl, and nearly succeeded. "No, sir, I understand," she breathed.

"Once you have mastered the charms cast upon the trunk, I suggest we repair to the library where I shall identify each item for you. After that, we can establish a study plan and an appropriate timetable," Dumbledore said. He raised an eyebrow and Hermione thought his eyes twinkled slightly, though it might have been a trick of the light. "Do I sense excitement on your part?"

Hermione suppressed a smile. “I do enjoy the pursuit of knowledge, I suppose.”

“Ah, but you find appeal in both the pursuit and the application of knowledge, Miss Granger; you long to solve problems,” Dumbledore observed. “In fact, you are attracted to the most difficult of problems even when others falter. I daresay that this predilection is one of several reasons that you were sorted into Gryffindor House, and not into Ravenclaw House.”

Hermione turned her eyes to the azure horizon, and gently rocked back and forth in her chair. “I... don’t feel much like a Gryffindor this summer, Headmaster. I’ve wondered... this sounds ridiculous, I realise... but I’ve wondered whether perhaps I’m in Gryffindor because, well... because Harry needed a Ravenclaw at hand?”

Dumbledore seemed to ponder what she had said in a serious way. “The Sorting Hat has, on rare occasions, engaged in machinations for inscrutable purposes,” Dumbledore allowed, “and it knew precisely who Harry Potter was when it sorted your year. Harry did need you, as it turned out – and still needs you – but you are a Gryffindor because you belong in Gryffindor House. If you think on it objectively, you will recognise and agree with the Hat’s logic.”

“If you say so, sir,” Hermione said doubtfully.

“Realistic appraisal of one’s gifts and one’s deficits is a useful activity, Miss Granger; it unburdens the mind. Self-doubt is another matter entirely,” Dumbledore gently chided. “We shall work on this; I expect Dr. Covelli will be most helpful to you in that way.” He reached across the table, placed his hand atop hers, and smiled. “Now, let us have a look at the charms placed upon this trunk.”

* * * * *

August 30, 1996

Hermione closed yet another book; she let out an irritated huff. Reading wasn’t making her feel better, reading wasn’t making her

drowsy, she was learning nothing from it – reading was doing nothing for her at all. It was nearly midnight, she no longer wanted to read, and sleep was as elusive as one of Luna's imagined beasts. At least they booked me my own room, Hermione thought; at least Mum and Dad can rest.

She was reluctant to let her parents go, unlike previous partings at the close of the holidays. This time, she knew it was unlikely she'd see them for Christmas. There would be no returning to Winchester – the only home she'd ever known was listed for sale. She didn't even know where her Mum and Dad would be, and she knew that was for the best. They had come to some sort of agreement with Professor Dumbledore, and that was all they would tell her. It had instantly occurred to her that she might never see them again – that they would survive and she might not – and she had tried her best to ward the thought away.

Everyone seemed to be falling away from her, save the Headmaster and Dr. Covelli. She was grateful that Dr. Covelli was returning to England, perhaps even a little excited, though she couldn't place exactly why she felt that way. It wasn't a matter of having a psychologist close at hand; she was certain of that much. Her feelings about Professor Dumbledore were much more confusing. On the one hand, he seemed genuinely apologetic about his hand in Harry's dismal childhood and about everything that had transpired over the holidays. On the other hand, Hermione was certain that he was attempting to manipulate her; she suspected that he saw her as a means of control over Harry, and she was determined to prevent that from happening. On the mean, she was pleased that she would be studying with him. There was much to be gained, both for the greater good and for herself.

A small stack of her own books sat inside the trunk that only she could see, next to the three stacks of books, scrolls, clippings and other items that Professor Dumbledore had provided. The contents were well organized now, another consequence of sleeplessness. There was a tight roll of soft fabric placed between the stacks; a strand of gold trailing from one end of the roll caught the light for a moment.

The Dreamweaver attracted her and repelled her all at once. Using it felt to her like the ultimate surrender of control; at the same time, the surrender – if there was any – was to her own consciousness. Many of the fears spread about Dreamweavers had been allayed as Dr. Covelli had helped her craft one for herself. Covelli's charms work had been inventive and amazing, and Hermione had been more than a little awed by it. The old tales of addiction were impossible, or should have been at any rate. Covelli's self-regulating charms effectively prevented the Dreamweaver from functioning unless it was needed to guide a difficult dream or restore lost balance of some sort.

She strolled to the curtained doors that led to the balcony. They wouldn't open, of course, as Mr. Moody had surely spelled them shut and cast protections of all descriptions... and a few that defy description, I'll wager, Hermione mused. The curtains did give slightly, and she chanced a peek at the piazza below. There were a few people about, but not nearly as many as she would have expected on a warm Roman night.

Harry's latest post sat open atop her knapsack. Mr. Moody had brought it to her just after sunset. She had read it several times, hoping to draw something from the words. It was friendly but somehow forced. He had admitted that there were things she needed to be told, but she suspected that there was more for the telling than he was prepared to give her. Her first impulse was to be irritated by that, but she was resolved to treat Harry differently this year; he was a fully-qualified wizard, and the last months had proven that her decisions were no better than his – better informed, but no better in the end.

She had been very angry when she first found out that her post to him had been banished, but hadn't stayed angry. If anything, the image of Harry awash in owls had been a bit amusing. Dumbledore's decision to abandon Harry had been incomprehensible to her, and she had made her feelings abundantly clear. She had taken that opportunity to inform the Headmaster that she intended to resign her appointment as Prefect, and that had created more of a stir than she had anticipated. Her decision had been firm, however, and Professor McGonagall had accepted her letter of resignation; the Professor hadn't spoken to her since.

Some of Dr. Covelli's creamy paper stuck out of her knapsack, and she carefully tucked it away along with Harry's post. She had considered repeating her post to Harry – revising and resending it, in truth – but had demurred. As Harry had written, some things were best left out of a post; she would see him soon enough.

The roll of fabric in the trunk kept catching her attention; she gave it one surreptitious glance after another. It was less than five hours until they had to leave for the aerodrome, and at its weakest the Dreamweaver did little more than ward off nightmares. There had been far too many of those over the summer, and Hermione feared that there were many more to come. She craved one more night of restful sleep, and her desire won out. The Dreamweaver came easily out of the roll and fit perfectly against her. She was asleep as soon as her hands cleared the gold netting.

Professor McGonagall looked down the length of her rather sharp nose, her lips bloodless and thin. "Turn to page 5,637 in the Pangloss text, please. We will be transfiguring living plants today – devil's snare into oleander – and the required incantation is particularly challenging... Miss Granger, is there a problem?"

Hermione felt the flush creep upward from the base of her neck. "N-nothing, ma'am, I'm just... er..."

Professor McGonagall tapped her foot. "You're dissembling."

"It's just... uh..." Hermione's heart was pounding. She rifled through her bag with shaking hands. "It seems that m-my book is by Pym, not Pangloss... and it couldn't possibly have more than a thousand pages or so..."

Professor McGonagall closed her eyes tightly and her jaw followed; then she sighed loudly. "May I presume that you completed the required scroll for today?"

A scroll appeared on her desk. “Yes, ma’am, I have it,” Hermione said excitedly.

“Very well,” McGonagall said. She smiled wickedly. “You may present first.”

Hermione looked down, and very quickly returned her gaze to the board behind Professor McGonagall. “Oh, no... ma’am, I... please...”

“It seems that the proper text is not the only thing you neglected to bring to class,” Professor McGonagall sneered. “If you do not begin your presentation in fifteen seconds, Miss Granger, I shall have to take fifty points from Gryffindor House.”

A voice cut through the fear – a familiar voice. Professor McGonagall never sneers. Pangloss is a character from Muggle literature. You’ve never seen a single book 5,000 pages in length. Everything that the voice said was true, but she couldn’t seem to take it in.

“Harry s-stopped this... this can’t be...” she mumbled.

“Mister Potter is no longer a student here. He can’t help you, Miss Granger. Your presentation – NOW, please,” Professor McGonagall snapped.

Hermione took a deep breath and unfurled the scroll. Professor McGonagall hadn’t even had the decency to impose a lengthy assignment. She quickly decided to hold the abbreviated parchment at her hips, and dashed to the front of the room.

“Oh, my eyes!” Draco Malfoy howled. “My eyes, they burn!”

Pansy Parkinson sniffed, “As if it weren’t enough to be a bossy, ill-mannered grind... well, you know what they say – a banshee in a ball gown is still a banshee. It’s obvious that a Mudblood undressed is still a Mudblood, as well.”

“That will be quite enough,” Professor McGonagall said half-heartedly.

“Granger, I wouldn’t even foist you on Goyle,” Malfoy sneered. “Sweet Merlin, Longbottom could do better.” Neville wouldn’t make eye contact and Hermione didn’t know if it was because he was embarrassed or because Malfoy was telling the truth.

“Two points from Slytherin House,” Professor McGonagall yawned.

The disembodied voice was insistent, and Hermione struggled to grasp its advice. You’re neither exceptionally ugly nor exceptionally attractive. You’re not a prize to be won, nor a penalty to be paid. This dream is false, and you know it.

She looked at herself again, unflinchingly. The voice was correct: there was nothing exceptional about her, nothing that merited abuse or shame, or catcalls for that matter. There was nothing about her that merited shame, she recognised, nothing at all.

Hermione cleared her throat, and raised the short roll of parchment. The words swam, and then resolved again. The hisses and the jeers all faded away. She read aloud, “What Voldemort did to me, he chose to do. I did nothing to bring it upon myself. Harry did nothing to bring it upon me, other than simply being born. None of you can cause me to be ashamed unless I allow it. None of you can make me dislike myself unless I allow it.” Her hands opened, and the parchment fell to the floor. She let her hands drop to her sides, defenceless. “I refuse.”

McGonagall smiled faintly. “One hundred points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger,” she said, and then the Transfiguration classroom was gone.

Hermione found herself on the spiral stairs that led to the top of the Astronomy Tower. She climbed, because she knew that she had to climb in order to end this. Professor Dumbledore rounded the curve, on his way down.

His eyes met hers. “Good evening, Miss Granger. Are you taking a constitutional?”

Hermione tried very hard not to look at Dumbledore as though he’d sprouted a second head. “Erm... no, sir. I need to go to the top of the tower, so if you’ll excuse me...”

“It is liberating to be stripped of one’s fears, but sometimes we are merely left exposed to greater fears,” Dumbledore said. “You may find what lies at the top of the tower very frightening, indeed.”

“I need to go to the top, sir,” Hermione insisted.

“Why, may I ask? Do you believe that this is somehow noble? Are you trying to prove your worth?” Dumbledore challenged. “What do you hope to accomplish?”

“I want to save him,” Hermione blurted out.

“Save him from what, I wonder?” Dumbledore mused. “Ah, it is no matter. More important, what are you willing to sacrifice?”

“Everything,” she whispered.

“You may wish to find out what that might entail, before making such a pledge,” Dumbledore cautioned. “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Answer me this, Miss Granger... could you allow it?”

“I... have to go up there,” Hermione insisted.

“It is on your head, then – do not fail us,” Dumbledore said. He stroked his beard, and added abruptly, “Tell me... am I accurately described as niminy-piminy?”

“Niminy... wh... what?” Hermione stammered.

“Niminy-piminy, Miss Granger,” Dumbledore repeated. “It struck me as odd... once again, no matter. I must now take my leave. My own evening constitutional is always followed with proper foot care and a well-prepared pot of tea... perhaps you should try it at your leisure? I admit that it is certainly less bracing than the routine you have adopted.” He proceeded down the steps and out of view, whistling a bizarre and unfamiliar tune. Hermione looked up the spiralling stairs into the nothingness, took a deep breath, and drove herself toward the top.

He was there, resting on his forearms against the low wall, looking out at the Forbidden Forest and the lake and the rest of the world that lay in wait. The greatest fears always seemed to lie at the end of a dream, at the end of an adventure, so he had to be there. He heard the door creak, which ended any possibility for her to turn back. He saw her, gaped like a fish out of water, and slammed his eyes shut. “Hermione! Where are... what do you think you’re... I... it’s very cold out here; you’ll catch your death!” Harry spluttered.

Hermione’s voice trembled; she wasn’t sure if it was from the sudden blast of cold air or a rush of fear. “Harry, w-would you just look at me, please? It’ll all be over if you just look at me... I’m n-not ashamed anymore. I’ve nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I couldn’t possibly!” Harry shouted in a panic. “You’re going to freeze to death out here!” He dashed forward with one eye opened in the slightest squint, and pulled her inside his cloak.

Her teeth chattered and he managed to somehow draw her closer, which nearly destroyed any resolve that remained in her. “Harry, p-please just end this – just look at me, so I can move past it.”

“Move past it?” Harry laughed nervously. “Explain how I’m supposed to move past taking a look at you right now!”

She drew some strength from frustration. “Honestly, Harry,” she sighed. “This is just symbolism, after all. Being undressed in a dream symbolises being exposed in a threatening way. I fear having others see the real me, because... because I just fear it, right?”

“So you’re running around the castle starkers, because you’re afraid people will see the real you?” Harry asked. “Erm... Hermione, are you... you know... feeling better lately?”

Hermione said brightly, “I stood up to the Slytherins in Transfiguration class –”

“I thought we’d already put a stop to that one,” Harry cut in.

"I needed to manage it on my own," Hermione explained, "and now I need to manage this as well."

Harry's brow beetled in confusion. "But I've already seen the real you... haven't I?"

Hermione groaned. "I'm not in the mood for stalling. I want to be done with this; I'm tired of this dream. I don't understand why you're being so obstinate."

Harry was sweating profusely at the temples, which Hermione found rather odd considering the chill in the air. "Hermione... er... perhaps it hasn't occurred to you, but... you do understand that I'm an ordinary bloke... don't you?"

"No, I don't understand..." Hermione trailed off, and then squeaked, "Oh!"

Sweaty redness spread up the sides of Harry's neck. "The thing is, I couldn't help seeing a little... erm... I saw enough, and... the thing is... you've nothing to be ashamed of." His voice cracked badly, and he winced.

The same voice as before whispered to her, the voice she now knew to be her own. This isn't about his comfort, it's about yours. Finish the dream, and let him go.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione said quickly, and she pulled herself free from his cloak. He took in a sharp breath. His eyes locked onto hers; she waited for several moments, but they never wavered. He never lowered his gaze, not for an instant; he was still as good as before the Department of Mysteries: as good as before Voldemort paid her a visit.

Harry let his cloak fall. He was dressed in his worst set of Dursley hand-me-downs. "You've seen the real me, you know. I'm not all that complicated, really. I'm not all that special," he said.

She shook her head at him, and forced herself to walk briskly to the edge.

“What are you doing?” Harry shouted. “We’re a hundred feet from the ground!”

“I have to let you go,” Hermione choked out. “If it ever comes to that... Lord help me... I have to let go.”

“Why?” Harry demanded.

She looked back at him and her feet locked into place. She was made of words, but couldn’t summon one to describe her feelings for him - they were bigger than she was, bigger than either of them, and composed of so many layers that she was unsure of what lay at the centre. “You have a prophecy to fulfil. I can’t wish it away, and I could send you to your death by standing in the way. If it ever comes to that... you can’t think of anything but killing Voldemort. I’ll have to let you go, and hope that you return.”

Harry moved toward her cautiously. “There’s another choice. There’s always another choice.”

“I have to let you go,” she repeated, and let herself slowly fall forward.

“Fair enough,” Harry agreed. He reached out lightning-fast; he sought her hand, and he seized it. “You never said anything about me having to let you go.”

She couldn’t stop herself; her bare feet slid on the slick stone. His only reaction was to tighten his grip on her hand. They fell together – moonlit shadows plunging into the darkness – and she wasn’t afraid anymore. It felt like the place she was intended to be. It felt like coming home.